JAMES HADLEY

Panther

# CHASE

## THERE'S ALWAYS A PRICE TAG



"Come home with me," the drunk said, lurching around to the driving seat of the beautiful Rolls. "Come an' have a drink. It's the least I can do for a guy who's saved my life."

"I'll come," I said, "but you're not driving. You're not going to knock the gloss off this beauty."

Something in my voice made him stare, then he laughed, "You think she's sweet, do you? Can you handle her?"

I told him I could. So he let me drive.

"So you think she's sweet?" he said again as we purred off. "Wait till you . . ." he hesitated a moment, "see my wife. She's *really* glossy."

So I met his wife. And I'm still paying the price . . .

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# There's Always a Price Tag

On a hot night in June I happened to be lounging outside one of those lush Hollywood niteries that have no free table unless you have a five-figure income, when a tall man in a tuxedo came through the revolving doors as if shot out of a gun.

I could see by his rigid stare and the stiffness of his facial muscles that he was plastered to the hairline. He was a middle-aged bird with a complexion like an overripe plum, raven black hair with a white streak in it and a moustache not much bigger than a well-fed caterpillar. Before his complexion had turned sour on him, he must have been handsome, but that raw mauve skin spoilt any claim he might now have had to a Hollywood Adonis.

He came down the six shallow steps that led from the night club as if they didn't exist, and headed towards the main street that was loaded with fast-moving traffic.

I should have minded my own business and let him walk to his death. If I had done so I should have kept out of a lot of trouble, but instead, just as he reached the kerb, still going fast, and just as a big Packard, going a lot faster, would have nailed him if he had taken another step forward, I reached out, grabbed his arm and jerked him back.

The Packard went past with a swish of tyres. The driver, a dark, fat man with sideboards and Latin eyes, showed by the way he bared his teeth and by the way his eyes popped out that he knew how close he had been to a manslaughter rap, but he didn't stop.

The drunk leaned against me, his knees buckling.

"Gee, kid!" he said, "that was too damned close. Where did that jerk spring from?"

I shoved him off, steadied him and got ready to move on, then I paused. I was impressed by the cut of his tuxedo, his gold wrist-watch and the rest of his trappings that reeked of money. If there's one thing that has an irresistible fascination for me besides a lovely woman, it's the reek of money.

So I paused, and as he swayed towards me, I put out a hand and steadied him.

"You saved my life," he said. "That car would have had me if you hadn't been so quick. It's something I won't forget."

"Do you know where you are going?" I asked, taking most of his weight on my outstretched arm.

"Of course I know where I am going. I'm going home if I can find my car."

"Are you driving?"

"Certainly I'm driving." He blinked at me, then grinned. "Okay, so I'm a little high, but who cares?"

"You can't drive the way you are," I said.

"Maybe you've got something, but I can't walk, can I? So what do I do?" He drew away from me, swayed uncertainly, caught his balance and gave me a wide, charming smile. "Now look, kid, see this thing through. Be a pal. You saved my life. Now help me find my car. It's a cream-and-blue Rolls: a convertible and hand built, and I'm not kidding."

I looked up and down the street, but there was no cream-and-blue convertible Rolls in sight.

"Where is it?"

"Somewhere around the back. Let's steady each other and go and look for it."

I gave him my arm, and we went around to the parking lot at the back of the night club in short, jerky rushes. He nearly had me over once, and he did fall himself, but we finally reached the car.

The Rolls, cream-and-blue, its hood down, looked very, very lush. It took the colour out of my bile just to look at it. For what it was, for the care and loving attention the builders had lavished on it, whatever it cost was a give-away price.

"Come home with me," the drunk said, moving like a sleep-walker around to the driving seat. "Come and have a drink. It's the least I can do for a guy who saved my life."

"I'll come with you," I said, "but you're not driving. You're not going to knock the gloss off this beauty."

There was something in my voice that made him stare, then he laughed.

"You think she's sweet, don't you? Well, so do I. Can you handle her?"

I told him I could handle her.

"Okay, kid, then take me home." He weaved his way around to the off-side door, opened it and poured himself into the seat. "256 Hill Crest Avenue: second on the left off Sunset Boulevard."

I opened the heavy coach-built door and eased myself on to what felt like a small, suspended cloud. By the time I had

started the engine, he had passed out. As soon as his head touched the padded head-rest, his eyes snapped shut and life ceased to exist for him.

There was a licence tag on the wheel. I took a look at it. I learned his name was Erle Dester and that he did live at 256 Hill Crest Avenue: one of the plushiest residential districts in Hollywood. You couldn't live on that avenue unless you had a lot of folding money.

As I edged the Rolls through the parking lot exit, I had the half-formed thought that I wasn't wasting my time.

The Rolls drove itself. We went up Sunset Boulevard with no more noise nor commotion than a leaf driven before a wind. I took the second turning on the left as directed and swept up the steep avenue for a couple of miles while I watched the number plates outside the various plush estates clicking up to the two hundreds.

"The gate by that street lamp," Dester said, lifting his head. The short drive in the warm night air seemed to have done him some good.

I slowed down, swung the car through the gateway, up a long twisting drive, lined with French poplars and on to an open tarmac by the side of an ornate Spanish-style house with an overhung balcony and wrought-iron lanterns at the front door. It was too dark to see much of the house, but what I could see of it told me it was in keeping.

I cut the engine and waited, my hands on the steering wheel, while I looked at the lighted lanterns and wondered what the next move was going to be.

Dester heaved himself upright, opened the car door and got out. I got out too.

"Well, here we are, kid," he said, propping himself up against the car. "Who did you say you were?"

"My name's Glyn Nash," I said.

"Glyn Nash? I reckon to know most people in Hollywood, but that's a new one on me. Never mind, I know it now. I'm Erle Dester. Maybe it's a new name to you. Well, come on in, Mr. Nash. This should be lots of fun. When I tell my wife that but for you she'd be a widow now, she'll be all over you." He laughed, throwing back his head. "This should be something."

He started off unsteadily, climbed the steps to the front door more by luck than judgment and produced a key. After two unsuccessful attempts to find the keyhole, he handed the key to me.

"You try. I bet you're smarter at this than I am."

I unlocked the door, pushed it open and followed him into a dimly lit hall. The modern wall clock told me it was five minutes after one o'clock a.m.

"My wife may have gone to bed," Dester said. "She reads in bed. Do you care for reading?"

"I can take it or leave it," I said.

"Me – I leave it, but Helen reads all the time." He led the way into a long, low-ceilinged lounge that was big enough to accommodate fifty or sixty people and still leave room for a few more. The decor was modern: the lounging chairs and sofas were in cream leather; the carpet and drapes were maroon. There was a television projection set; an elaborate radio and gramophone combination with a six-foot high corner horn, and a built-in bar before which stood a dozen high, cream-leather stools.

Dester headed for the bar like a homing pigeon, reached for a bottle of Vat 69, made two highballs and set them on the bar counter.

"Are you in the movie business, Mr. Nash?" he asked, cautiously climbing on a stool and resting his elbows on the bar.

"I'm in the advertising racket."

"Is that right? I've often thought of going into that racket myself. I guess there's plenty of money to be made in commercial television these days. You in that?"

"I sell space."

He grimaced.

"That could be a tough job, couldn't it?"

I said it was a tough job.

He looked at me then. Maybe the whisky fumes were lifting from his brain. He certainly seemed to be sobering up. I could tell by his expression, he was seeing me for the first time. He was seeing the suit I had been wearing hard for the past three years the shirt I had intended to wash yesterday, but hadn't got around to, the shoes that had taken me up and down hundreds of stairs and into hundreds of offices and out again, usually empty handed.

"You look as if you're having a rough time, kid; are you, or isn't it my business?"

I nearly told him it wasn't his business, but I remembered in time that this might be the opportunity I had been waiting for for three long years.

"Sure it's rough, but that's my funeral," I said. I had long learned that the rich boys are always on their guard against the

fast touch, and I didn't want to scare him so early in the game.

He took a small drink, set down the glass and blotted his mouth with a white silk handkerchief. There was a sudden far-away look in his eyes. He could have been going back into a coma or he could have been thinking: it was hard to tell.

"What do you earn a week if that's not being too personal?"

"Twenty bucks if I'm lucky. This is a paid-by-results job. I've had a bad week and didn't earn anything like that, but I'm still trying."

He stared at me.

"Can anyone live on twenty bucks?" He produced a heavy gold cigarette-case, took out a fat cigarette with a tricky monogram on it, lit it and stared at me as if I were something out of a zoo. "Look, I'd like to do something for you. After all you did save my life."

He was coming to it faster than I had hoped.

"You don't have to do that. Anyone would have done what I did," I said.

"I'd have been a dead duck by now if it hadn't been for you," he said, frowning. "That was a close thing. Besides, I like the look of you. I'm short of a chauffeur: a guy who can make himself useful around the house: throw a meal together, take me around, look after the Rolls. How would you like to help me out? I'll pay fifty a week and all found. Any good to you?"

I had hoped he was going to slip me some folding money with a nice speech about my bravery. I hadn't bargained for a job; especially a chauffeur-cum-handyman job where I'd be at his beck and call twenty-four hours of the day. I've seen how some rich men handle their chauffeurs. If I had to work I wanted to have set hours, not to be at the beck and call of a guy like Dester.

I opened my mouth to tell him no. I intended to be polite about it in the hope the folding money would come as a consolation prize, when a woman's voice said from behind me, "Don't be absurd, Erle. We don't need a chauffeur."

I turned.

Have you ever fiddled with an electric fitment and got a shock up your arm? Of course you have; you know the kind of jolt it gives you: something you can't control; a jolt that hurts, but doesn't bruise; something that hits your muscles and leaves you a little breathless.

She was around twenty-six or seven, tall and slim with copper coloured hair and the cream-white complexion that goes with that coloured hair. Her eyes were large, and as green and as

bright and as hard as emeralds. She wasn't beautiful in the accepted Hollywood standard of beauty. She had too much character, and her mouth was a shade too thin and firm for real beauty, but there was that thing about her that lifted her right out of the usual run of beautiful women and made her sensational.

She had on a simple white négligé that reached from her throat to her feet and covered her arms. Around her slim waist was a gold chain, the only ornament she wore.

"Helen, my dear, I want you to meet Glyn Nash. You'll be happy to hear he saved my life. If he hadn't grabbed me as I was crossing the road, you would have been a widow right now. It was the quickest thing I've ever seen. I brought him back because I know you will want to thank him."

She turned and looked at me. "I'm sure my husband is exaggerating," she said, her strangely pale face expressionless. "Did you really save his life?"

"Go on, tell her, Nash. She won't believe me," Dester said and laughed.

"Well, he certainly wasn't looking where he was going," I said, feeling a tight band across my chest as I looked into those big emerald green eyes. "I guess he would have been killed if I hadn't . . ." I stopped then because an expression of cold, ferocious hatred jumped into her eyes. It wasn't something I was imagining. It was there, and it sent a chill up my spine.

Then the green eyes went as expressionless as two bits of glass. She gave me a slow, cool smile.

"How clever of you," she said.

"Don't you want to thank him?" Dester said, a sneer in his voice. "Well, never mind. I'm grateful to him. I owe him something. He handles the car beautifully. Simmonds has quit, so he can have his job if he wants it."

She had moved over to the bar where the light fell directly on her. I caught a glimpse of her shape under the misty folds of the négligé: a shape that sent my blood racing through my veins.

If I took the job, I'd be right next to her: day in, night out and I wanted to be next to her more than I wanted anything else in the world.

"I'd like the job," I said, pulling my eyes away from her with an effort. "I'd be glad of it."

That's how it started. That's how I walked into trouble.

My words seemed to hang in the air.

Helen – I'll call her that since that's the way I thought of her

as soon as I knew her name – poured herself a brandy, then she turned and leaned her lovely back against the bar so her round, full breasts, under the soft folds of the négligé, pointed at me.

"But, Erle, although I'm sure he is most suitable, don't you want to take up his references?" she said, and a cold little smile hit her mouth just to take the curse off it.

"Oh, we can go into that later," Dester said impatiently. "I'm going to do something for this guy: he saved my life. When can you start?" he went on to me.

"Whenever you wish . . . sir."

I remembered the sir a little late. He didn't notice it, but she did. She would always notice little things like that.

"You can start right now by putting the car away." He leaned across the bar and unhooked a key. "There's an apartment above the garage. Here's the key." He tossed it to me. "Make yourself at home. You'll find a uniform there. It should fit you. If it doesn't, take it to Myer on 3rd Street. He'll fix it for you."

I caught the key.

"Yes, sir."

"We are right out of staff at the moment," he went on. "Mrs. Dester has everything to do. I want you to help her – keep the place clean, keep an eye on the garden, clean the windows: that kind of thing. Think you can do it?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's fine. We don't eat here. You'll have to get your meals out or buy the stuff you want and cook it in your apartment. I'll settle the bills." He yawned. "Well, I guess I'll turn in. I've had quite a day." He gave me a fatuous smile. "You'll be happy with us, kid. We know how to look after our employees: look after us, and we'll look after you."

"Yes, sir. Good night." I looked at Helen. "Good night, madam."

She didn't say anything; her green eyes hated me, but that didn't bother me: don't they say hate is cousin to love? I was in and next to her. The rest depended on how I played my cards. I've been pretty successful with hostile women: that's about the only thing I can truthfully say I have been successful with up to now.

I went out of the lounge, leaving behind me an atmosphere you could lean against, into the hall, down the steps to the three-car garage. I put the Rolls away. Right by it was a two-seater Cadillac, and by the Cadillac, a Roadmaster Buick. Dester hadn't

mentioned these two. It looked as if I had some washing and polishing on my hands.

Right now I didn't care. I climbed the steep stairs that led to the apartment above the garage. It wasn't quite as plush as I had expected, but it wasn't bad: a lot better than the room I had been living in. The last occupant had quit in a hurry. He hadn't bothered to clean up before he went. There were the remains of a meal on the table; the ash-trays were crammed with stale-smelling cigarette-butts. Dust lay like a grey cloak over everything.

I still didn't care. I've lived rough for so long, another man's dirt and leavings didn't trouble me.

I stripped off the sheets and dropped them on the floor. I took off my jacket and shoes, pulled my tie and prepared to settle down on the blanket I had spread over the mattress when I heard a movement on the stairs. I put on my shoes again, went to the bedroom door as Helen opened the outer door and came into the sitting-room.

She had put on a black silk wrap over the white néglígé. She stood in the doorway looking at me, her big emerald green eyes expressionless. I waited, looking at her from across the room, knowing she hadn't come because she had suddenly fallen for me: even for me that would be a shade too fast.

"Yes, madam?" I said, my voice nicely modulated, my manner nicely humble.

"Oh, Nash: I don't think you need stay," she said, her voice colder than a Siberian wind and as penetrating. "Mr. Dester isn't well to-night. Of course he is grateful, but he doesn't need a chauffeur."

I leaned against the doorpost and tried to look as if what she said made a lot of sense to me.

"If you'll excuse me, madam," I said, "but Mr. Dester engaged me. It's his business to tell me if he wants me to stay or not."

"Yes." She looked as if she were talking to an idiot child. "But he isn't quite himself to-night. He doesn't want you here."

"Perhaps he will tell me that to-morrow morning when he is more himself."

The green of her eyes seemed to deepen.

"I'm only telling you this for your good," she said. "The other man left because he didn't get paid, because he didn't get any sleep, because he found my husband impossible to work for."

"I wouldn't know about that, madam," I said. "Right now

I'm glad to have a roof over my head. Getting paid wouldn't bother me one way or the other. I've done without sleep for so long, a little less wouldn't bother me either, and I'd like to judge for myself if the work is impossible or not."

She lifted her elegant shoulders.

"You don't look like a fool, but apparently you must be."

"You'll have the opportunity to judge me better when you know me better, madam," I said.

"I'm telling you!" she said, her voice suddenly harsh. "You're not wanted here! My husband was drunk when he engaged you." She held out her hand. Between her long, slender fingers was a hundred-dollar bill. "Here, take this and get out!"

And that's what I should have done, but I was still trying to play it smart.

"I haven't earned it, madam," I said. "Thank you all the same, but if you'll pardon me, Mr. Dester's the one to tell me to go."

The glitter suddenly went out of her eyes.

"Then if you must be stupid, be stupid." She came farther into the room. "There's nothing here for you, Nash. I can imagine a man like you would naturally jump to the conclusion that there will be easy pickings in a job like this, but you are making a mistake. There are no easy pickings."

"I just want the job, madam," I said. "I've always wanted to drive a Rolls. I don't know what you mean by easy pickings."

She laughed then, tossing back her splendid head and showing me the white column of her throat.

"It's a nice act, but it doesn't come off. There's nothing here for you. We have no money. In a few weeks, Mr. Dester will be unemployed. We can't afford servants any more. I do all the housework. It is only because he was drunk to-night that he offered you this job. You won't get paid, so don't imagine you will."

That jarred me a little, but it also aroused my curiosity.

"I don't know anything about that, madam. It isn't my business. Mr. Dester gave me the job. It's up to him to tell me he doesn't want me."

She gave me a contemptuous look.

"All right, if that's the way you want to act don't say I didn't warn you." She moved about the room, keeping in the shadows. Suddenly she said, "Did you really save my husband's life to-night?"

"Of course," I said. "A Packard, going at forty miles an

hour, would have nailed him if I hadn't pulled him out of the way. He said if I hadn't been so quick you would have been a widow by now."

She paused. Her face was like chiselled marble as she stared at me.

"Was that what he said?"

"Yes."

There was another long pause while we looked at each other, then I decided to dig a quick one in under her guard.

"If I had known you wanted him to die, I might not have pulled him out of the way, madam."

Her expression remained the same, but her eyes lit up. Perhaps her face went a shade paler. It was difficult to judge in the light that threw shadows on her.

"Really, Nash?" Her voice was a little more than a whisper, like the dry rustle of leaves, and it gave me a spooky feeling. "That's very interesting."

She turned and went silently out and down the stairs.

One of the few things the Army taught me that made sense was the value of knowing your enemy.

It seemed to me that Helen must have had a pretty urgent reason for wanting to get rid of me, and I was now curious to find out what that reason was. I was also curious to find out why she hated her husband so badly she wanted him dead. The setup was intriguing. I decided I'd be Dester's chauffeur for a week or so. The change from tramping the streets, trying to sell space, would be welcome. I had nothing to lose at fifty a week and all found, and with any luck I might have a lot to gain. Even if Dester hadn't any money as she had said, and I didn't believe her, I would at least have a roof over my head, and food.

I got up around six-forty-five the next morning, cleaned the apartment, put new sheets that I found in a closet on the bed, got rid of most of the traces of the last occupant, and then tried on his uniform. It was brand new, and it fitted me as if it were made for me: a light grey whipcord double-breasted jacket, riding breeches, knee boots and a peaked cap with a cockade on it: quite an outfit.

In one of the pockets of the jacket I found a soiled envelope. On it was scrawled: *Ben Simmonds. 57a Clifford Street, Hollywood.*

I remembered Simmonds was the name of the chauffeur who had left Dester's service. I wondered if he was still living on

Clifford Street. It seemed an idea to have a talk with him.

At eight-fifteen I went over to the house and around to the kitchen door.

There was no sign of life in the kitchen and no sign of any food, but I could smell coffee coming from upstairs.

Standing against the wall was an eight-foot-long deep-freeze cabinet that could have held enough food to feed a large family for a year.

Before I had hooked up with Solly and his advertising racket, I had spent two dreary years trying to fiddle deep-freeze cabinets to hick farmers in the Ohio farming belt. The sight of that big freezer brought back memories that made me wince, but that didn't stop me from opening the lid and looking inside. It was as bare as the back of my hand and I shut the lid with a grunt of disgust. That cabinet must have cost a whale of a lot of money: it was a rank waste to leave it empty.

In the pantry I found a half-bottle of cream and a jug of yesterday's coffee. I was heating up the coffee when the kitchen door pushed open and Helen came in.

She was wearing a black wool sweater and pale blue slacks. She had a figure that looked provocative in slacks. I looked at her, feeling again that tight grip across my chest.

"What are you doing here?" she asked curtly, staring at me.

"I just looked in for some coffee, madam," I said. "I hope I'm not in the way."

"I don't want you in the house, Nash," she said, moving to the door. "Your job is to drive Mr. Dester to the office. Keep to your own apartment."

Well, at least she was now admitting I had a job here; that was a concession.

"Isn't there anything I can do for you, madam?" I said. "Nothing in the house you want done?"

"Not by you. Keep away from here," and she went out.

I drank the coffee, washed up the cup and then went back to the garage. I got out the Rolls, washed and polished it, then drove it around to the front entrance. By then it was a few minutes after ten o'clock.

I sat at the wheel and waited.

At half past ten, Dester came down the steps. He was wearing a pearl grey lounge suit and a slouch hat, and he had a brief-case under his arm.

"Morning, Nash," he said as I slid out of the car and opened

the door for him. "That uniform looks pretty well. Did you get breakfast?"

"Yes, sir."

The bright sunlight wasn't kind to him. His complexion looked like raw meat and his eyes were bloodshot and watery.

"Do you know where the Pacific Studios are?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's where I work." He got into the car and relaxed on the back seat. He seemed glad to take the weight off his legs. "Hurry it along, kid. I'm a little late."

I drove him to the studios; pushing the pace, but not overdoing it.

The guard opened the double gates. I noticed he didn't salute Dester as I drove past, and I thought that was odd.

Dester directed me to the big office block that stood away from the main studios. I pulled up outside the entrance.

"Pick me up here at four o'clock. You can go back now and help Mrs. Dester in the house."

"She tells me she doesn't want any help, sir," I said.

He seemed not to hear me. I watched him climb the steps to the entrance of the building, then disappear through the swing doors. I got back into the Rolls and drove down to the main entrance. The guard opened the gates. He didn't even bother to look at me. I wondered what one needed to have besides a Rolls to get a little respect from this guy.

When I had got some distance from the studios, I parked the car and went to an eating joint and bought myself a breakfast. I had fifteen bucks to last me until Dester produced something. I laid out five bucks on a small store of food, coffee and groceries. These I carried to the car, then I drove over to Clifford Street that happened to be four streets away from my own apartment house.

I pulled up outside 57, and rang the bell of Apartment 'A'. After a few moments a buzzer sounded and the front door clicked open.

Simmonds had a couple of rooms on the third floor. He was standing in the doorway waiting for me as I came up the last flight of stairs: a guy about my build with grey hair and a lined, humourous face. As soon as he saw the uniform I was wearing he grinned: it was the kind of grin you reserve for suckers, but that didn't bother me. I grinned back.

"I'm Dester's new chauffeur as if you need to be told," I said. "I've looked in for some information."

"Come on in," he said, opening the door. "There's a sucker born every minute, but don't think you're the only one. I kidded myself I had landed on the gravy train when I took that job: I know a lot better now."

I walked into a room that was coated with dust and smelt the same way as the apartment over the garage had smelt before I had cleaned it.

"I'm not kidding myself," I said, putting my cap on the cleanest part of the table. "I know I haven't got myself anything to shout about, but it suits me as a temporary job. My name's Glyn Nash."

Simmonds waved me to a chair and went into the far room. He returned with two cups and a pot of coffee.

"It'll be temporary okay," he said, taking the cigarette I offered him. "I bet you'll be out by the end of the week. No one has stuck longer except me. I lasted two weeks."

"What's wrong with the job?" I asked, accepting the cup of coffee he shoved at me.

"Plenty: a combination of rats and a sinking ship and Mrs. Dester. Have you run into her yet?"

"Sure; she's already told me I'm not wanted."

"Then take the hint, pal: quit before you hit trouble. That dame can make plenty of trouble. I was mug enough to stick after she had told me to get out. She nearly had me on a stealing rap."

That jolted me. "What was that again?"

He grinned, showing tobacco-stained teeth.

"That's right. She gave me a hundred-dollar bill to settle the gasoline account. I thought it was funny because Dester pays the accounts when he does pay them. I've got a suspicious mind, and I'm glad of it. I trusted her the way I'd trust a rattlesnake. I went over the bill very, very carefully. She had pricked a cross in it with a pin. It didn't take me a couple of seconds to figure out what the next move was to be. I had just time to shove the bill into the fire when two dicks walked in. They went over me and the rooms with a tooth comb, but they didn't find the bill. They told me she had complained that she had been missing money for some time, and she thought I was the guy who was helping himself. It was a close thing, and when they left, I packed and got out fast."

I stared at him, remembering how she had offered me a hundred-dollar bill the previous night.

"What's the idea? Why doesn't she want her husband to have chauffeur?"

He shrugged.

"Three months ago, they had a cook, a houseboy, and two maids," he told me, "as well as a gardener and a chauffeur. Then all of a sudden she got rid of them all, closed up most of the rooms in the house and ran the place herself. Dester tried to keep a chauffeur, but sooner or later she fixed it that the guy couldn't take any more of it and quit. Don't ask me why. I wouldn't know."

"She says Dester hasn't any money."

"I wouldn't know about that. Maybe she's right. Maybe that's the answer, but she doesn't strike me as the type to run a house on her own just because he hasn't any money."

She didn't strike me as the type either.

"Who is Dester anyway?"

"You mean who was he," Simmonds said, finishing his coffee and pouring himself another cup. "One time he was chief executive producer for Pacific Studios, one of the biggest shots in the movie business. He's washed up now. They haven't renewed his contract. It runs out in a month or so; then he'll be nobody. He goes there every day and sits in his office, doing nothing. No one takes any notice of him. He's just sweating out his time."

"Why doesn't he look for some other job?"

Simmonds laughed. "Haven't you cottoned on to him yet? He's a lush. No one wants him. The only time he's sober is when he wakes up in the morning. He starts boozing at breakfast and goes right on until he falls into bed. I guess if I had married that redheaded bitch, I'd be a lush too. He's crazy about her. From what I hear she has her own room, and he hasn't been inside it since a few days after they married."

"Who is she and where does she come from?"

"I don't know. They've been married about a year. Since then he's been going down hill fast. The movie business doesn't want him any more. When his contract runs out, he'll be broke. So don't kid yourself you've got yourself a permanent job. You'll be lucky if you hold it a week."

"He can't be broke. He's got three cars and that house. The Rolls would fetch twelve thousand in the open market."

"I hear he's up to his eyes in debts, but I could be wrong," Simmonds said. "But it's my bet as soon as he leaves the Studios, the wolves will move in, and when they do, there won't

be anything left. I'd like to see that redhead earn her living. She'll find it tough after the way he's poured money into her lap."

"Did you get paid?" I asked.

"Sure, but I had to ask for it. Dester never remembers trifles like paying his servants." Simmonds looked at a cheap alarm clock on the bedside table. "I've got to be moving. I'm going after a job this morning: driving two old ladies. I guess it'll be a nice change after driving a drunk. You have a sweet time ahead of you. If he gets home by one o'clock he calls it an early night." He stood up. "But don't think I dislike the guy. I'm sorry for him. When you can catch him sober, you couldn't wish for a nicer guy to work for. The trouble is you don't often catch him sober. It's a knock out that a woman could ruin a man as fast as this redhead has ruined him. She must be crazy. By fixing him, she's fixed herself out of a big, juicy income, and that doesn't make sense to me. From what I've heard it is due to her he started to hit the bottle. I can't figure out what her game is."

As I drove over to my apartment house to collect my few belongings before returning to the Dester residence, I couldn't figure out what her game was either, but I was now determined to find out.

## CHAPTER TWO

As I pulled into the three-car garage, I saw the Cadillac convertible was missing. It wasn't hard to guess that the beautiful Mrs. Dester had taken herself out to lunch. The time was a quarter after twelve, and I thought it might be an idea, now that the house was empty, and if I could get in, to take a look around.

A window above the porch was open. It was an easy climb up on to the top of the porch, and simple to push up the window and step into a long passage that went past the head of the stairs.

There were seven bedrooms, three bathrooms and two dressing-rooms on the landing; five of the bedrooms were under dust sheets. Dester's bedroom was facing the stairs, and Helen's was at the other end of the passage.

I didn't go into any of the rooms. I opened the doors and looked at the rooms from the doorway.

Helen's room was large. A lot of money had been spent on it to make it luxurious. There was one of those huge beds you see so often on the movies, raised on a dais, with an oyster coloured quilted headpiece and a blood red bedspread. There were comfortable lounging chairs, a desk, a radiogram, an elaborate dressing-table, fitted closets and diffused lighting. It was a pretty nic retreat for a wife who wanted to sleep alone. It was easy to see b its immaculate luxury that no man found his way in there.

Dester's room was smaller and as comfortable as Helen's bu it looked neglected; even without going into the room I coul see a film of dust on the flat surfaces of the furniture. It wa easy to see Helen didn't spend much time looking after it.

It took me less than five minutes to see what I wanted to se and then I went downstairs. I skipped the lounge and explore the other five rooms; all of them were under dust sheets whic is one way of solving the domestic help problem.

Here was evidence to prove that Simmonds had been speakin the truth. It certainly looked as if Dester was on his way ou He was still putting up a show: the outside of the house looke prosperous enough, but this closing down of the rooms showe which way the wind was blowing.

I returned to the apartment over the garage, changed out my uniform, checked over my money that now amounted to te

bucks, and then walked down to the corner of the road where I picked up a bus that took me into the centre of the town.

I had a cheap lunch at a place I usually went to, then I walked over to Jack Solly's office on Brewer Street.

I had worked for Solly now for the past year. He called himself an advertising consultant and contractor. At one time he had been the sales manager of Herring & Inch, the big advertising contractors in New York. He had owned a Cadillac, a six-room apartment, a five-figure income and a closet full of clothes. But he had always been an opportunist, specializing on making a fast buck, and he had tried to make himself a little extra on the side by offering some of Herring & Inch's accounts to a rival firm for a substantial rake-off. Someone ratted, and Solly lost his job, his income and his Cadillac in that order: worse, he was black listed and he soon discovered he had no hope of ever working for another firm of advertising contractors. So he came to Hollywood with what he had saved from the wreck and opened an office and started in to work for himself.

He now handled the business of small shopkeepers, one-man offices and the like and just managed to scrape up a living.

Solly was a tall, thin bird with a face like a hatchet, deep-set stony black eyes and a mouth like a gin-trap. He was a tough character, and as the years passed, and his lack of success sank in, and his need for money increased, he lost what ethics he might have had, and twice already he had had a brush with the police on a shady deal, the details of which I hadn't been told.

He was sitting at his desk, his beaky nose in a pulp magazine when I pushed open the door and walked into his shabby, down-at-the-heel office.

Patsy, his blonde secretary, a twenty-three-year-old, over-ripe dish with a baby face and wordly wise eyes, looked up as I came in and gave me a cheerful smile. She had a hard time of it with Solly: she not only had to run the office, but she was expected to stay late when Solly's glands were making life a burden to him without having an addition in her pay packet. She was eating her lunch out of a paper bag.

Solly laid down his magazine and looked at me, his black eyes hostile.

"What do you imagine this is?" he asked. "Look at the time. You're supposed to clock in here at nine o'clock."

"Relax, brother," I said, sitting on the edge of his desk. "I'm not working for you any more."

Patsy put her half-eaten sandwich down on the desk, swung

her chair around so she could take a good look at me. Her big blue eyes popped wide open.

Solly regarded me sourly.

"I've quit," I said. "You'll have to find another sucker to work for you, Jack. I've got me a new career."

Solly's face lengthened.

"Who are you working for then?" he asked, leaning back in his chair. "Maybe I can give you a raise. You don't want to be hasty about this. You wouldn't try to steal any of my accounts, would you?"

"If I happened to be nuts enough to take another job like this one and for another shark like you, of course I'd steal as many of your accounts that are worth stealing, and they aren't many," I said. "But relax. I've quit the racket. I've got myself a nice easy job that pays fifty a week and all found: including a uniform."

Solly's eyes bulged, while Patsy, who had picked up her sandwich, held it before her open mouth as she gaped at me.

"What do you mean – a uniform?" Solly demanded.

"I'm a chauffeur," I said, giving Patsy a wink. "A chauffeur to one of the big shots at the Pacific Studios. How do you like that?"

"Why, you're crazy!" Solly said. "Do you call that a job? Who but a crazy man wants to be a chauffeur? You don't know when you're well off. Don't you know how they treat chauffeurs in this town? You might just as well have a ball and chain on your leg. You must be stark raving nuts to take a job like that."

"I very nearly didn't, but I happened to catch sight of the boss's wife," I said.

"His wife?" Solly's expression changed. He looked the way a gundog looks when his master takes aim. The most important thing in Solly's life after money was women.

"You men make me sick to my stomach," Patsy said, getting up. "I'm going to the john. Get the gruesome details over before I get back, will you please?"

Solly aimed a slap at her as she passed him, but he had done this so often, she had no trouble in whipping her tail out of reach.

When she had shut the door, Solly took out two cigarettes, rolled one across the desk to me and offered me a light.

"What's this about his wife?" he asked.

"She's nice," I said, and drew a shape in the air with my hands. "Very, very lush: redheaded, green eyes and a figure like

a bra. ad. I didn't see why I shouldn't give myself a job right next to her when it was offered to me. And apart from the sex interest, I drive a cream-and-blue Rolls convertible that's as big and as expensive as a battleship. Isn't that an improvement on this lousy job?"

"Sounds like it," Solly said reflectively. "They don't want a butler, do they? I could talk to the redhead while you're driving the husband to work."

"They don't want anyone but me," I said grinning.

"But seriously, Glyn, where will it get you? A chauffeur's job is no kind of life for an up and coming guy like you."

"Where's your job going to get me, come to that?"

"If you'd only work at it and get some business, I might make you a partner one of these days," Solly said and smirked. "You're not a bad guy if you weren't so damned lazy."

I laughed. "That's good coming from you."

Solly flicked ash on to the carpet, swung his feet up on to his desk and waved his hand.

"Who's this big shot anyway?"

"His name's Erle Dester."

The only reason why I was giving Solly all this dope was because there were very few big names in Hollywood that he didn't know. I was still fishing for information, but you don't ask a guy like Solly outright for information unless you want to pay for it.

Solly's grin slipped and he stared at me.

"Dester? You don't mean Erle Dester at the Pacific, do you?"

"Of course I do; who else should I mean?"

"Well, for sweet Pete's sake!"

"Do you know him then?"

"Know him? That lush? I'll have you know I'm careful with whom I associate. Why, Glyn, you're out of your mind. Listen, that guy is washed-up. In a couple of months he'll either be bankrupt or he'll have a hole in his head. Erle Dester! For the love of mike!"

I made out I was nonplussed.

"You wouldn't kid me, Jack?"

"Look, this guy's more than a drunk: he's an alcoholic. He's never sober. No one wants him in the movie business. His contract runs out at the end of the month. And that wife of his! You won't get anything but trouble from her. I've seen her: okay, she looks good, I'll give you that, but she's just a beautiful shape wrapped around an iceberg."

"All the same, I think I could get to the first base with her. I think I could thaw her out."

Solly sneered.

"Now you really are kidding yourself. I've heard things about *that dame*. They say she drove Dester to drink. I reckon if I married her and found out she was a block of ice, I'd take to drink myself. I heard it said there was another guy who threw himself out of the window because of her. Boy! You're certainly kidding yourself if you think you can thaw her out. You haven't a chance, and if you don't want to finish up a rumdum like her husband, you'd better leave her strictly alone."

"Who was she before she married Dester?"

"I don't know. He met her in New York, married her and brought her back here. It doesn't matter who she is. Leave her alone or you'll be up to your neck in the stuff."

"Well, thanks for the advice, but you don't scare me," I said, pushing back my chair. "If Dester drops dead and Mrs. D. asks me to marry her, I'll get you to be my best man."

"What a pipe dream!" Solly said in disgust. "Now for the love of mike, sober up. Come back here and get down to a job of work. I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll raise your cut to fifteen per cent. I can't be fairer than that, can I?"

"Shove it," I said cheerfully. "I'm going to stick with Dester until he goes broke. By that time I shall be house-trained, and I'll ask Sam Goldwyn for a job."

Solly lifted his shoulders and spread out his hands.

"You're nuts, but okay. When you're tired of the job, come back to me. I'll keep your job open for you."

"The only reason why you'll keep it open, Jack, is because you know damn well no other sucker would have it," I said. "So long. Don't wave to me if you see me in the Rolls. I too have to be careful now whom I know."

I went down the stairs into the hot sunshine.

*Another guy threw himself out of a window because of her.* What guy and why? I asked myself.

When I returned to the Desters' residence around three in the afternoon, the Cadillac convertible was still missing. I put on my uniform, made sure I looked immaculate, then drove over to the Pacific Studios.

The guard opened the gates without looking at me, and I drove over to the office block with an embarrassed feeling that I was trespassing.

I backed the Rolls into one of the chalked-out spaces before the office block and settled down to wait. At twenty minutes past four I left the car, walked up the steps and into the vast hall where a dozen bell hops sat on a bench beside a big circular desk where four lovelies handled inquiries and visitors.

One of them, fair, rising nineteen, with that fresh complexion that only healthy teenagers seem to monopolize, looked inquiringly at me.

"Yes?"

"Will you tell Mr. Dester his car is here?" I said.

Plucked eyebrows lifted.

"Mr. – who?"

"Mr. Dester: spelt D-e-s-t-e-r: pronounced Dester."

A slight flush rose to her face.

"There's no Mr. Dester here," she snapped. "Try the studios."

"Look, baby, just move over and let me speak to someone who knows this job better than you do," I said. Then spotting a dark, sleek young woman who was busily buffing her finger-nails, I raised my voice: "Hey, honey, a moment of your precious time."

The dark one froze into an outraged statue.

"Were you by any chance addressing me?" she asked in a voice you could frost a cake with.

"Sure," I said. "What do I do to get some service in this joint? I want Mr. Erle Dester. Where do I find him?"

She flicked open a reference book, stared at it, showed her surprise at finding his name in the book, and said in the same frosty voice, "Room 47, first floor."

She then turned her back on me.

The row of bell hops moved excitedly as they listened to and sniggered at this little scene. I picked on the fattest of them and hauled him to his feet by his right ear.

"Take me to Room 47, sonny," I said, "and snap it up."

He hesitated, and we looked at each other. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell me to go jump in a lake. I balled my fist and smiled at him.

He decided not to call my bluff and set off up the wide staircase while the rest of the bell hops and the four lovelies stared after me as if I were the first visitor from Mars.

Fatso took me down a long corridor with fancy name plates screwed to each door, and with fancier names. Room 47 had no

plate on it, but you could see where it had been by the four small screw holes.

"He hangs out here," the boy said, jerking his thumb contemptuously at the door.

"Thanks, sonny."

It was just the kind of room you'd expect a big-shot producer to be in. The carpet had a two-inch pile; the desk, chairs and trappings were modern and expensive; the decor was costly and tasteful. There were seven red telephones, two white ones and a blue one on the desk: all of them at that moment were very silent, and they would probably remain silent. When you're slipping in the movie business, the first thing that goes is the telephone call.

Dester sat in the desk chair that was made of green leather, bucket shaped and comfortable enough to go to sleep in.

His hands rested on the edge of the desk: an empty bottle of Scotch stood on the virgin blotter, another bottle lolled in the trash basket. His eyes were fixed in a long, glaring stare at a point just above my head; his face was congested; his facial muscles appeared to be as stiff as a board.

"It's after four, sir," I said.

I might have been talking to the Great Sphinx for all the reaction I got. It occurred to me that he wasn't just tight; he was at this moment paralytic drunk.

I shut the door just in case someone might pass and look in. I removed the whisky bottle from the desk, then tapped him hard on his left shoulder.

Nothing happened. He continued to glare at the spot above the door. I felt his pulse. It was ticking over, but there was nothing very healthy about it. I loosened his collar. He still showed no reaction. He was as far gone as any drunk I've ever seen, and I've seen quite a few.

There was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't carry him along the passage and through the hall to the car. I would have to wait until he came to the surface, if he ever did, which at the moment seemed unlikely. I sat down in one of the comfortable lounging chairs, lit a cigarette and waited.

It seemed to me as I sat in this forgotten room, that if I were in Dester's place, sweating out time before I left here for ever, I might also be tempted to nibble at a drink or two. What puzzled me was why he should turn the knife in the wound. As he was washed-up, as nobody paid any attention to him, as no telephone bell rang for him, there seemed no point in his staying

in this room. Why didn't he just say, 'the hell with the lot of them', and stay at home?

After about half an hour of sitting in the chair, I began to get a feeling of claustrophobia. I got to my feet and began to prowl around, looking for something to break the monotony of just sitting and waiting.

There was still no sign of life from Dester. He continued to sit motionless and glare at the spot above the door. I went over to him and waved my hand in front of his eyes, but that got no reaction either.

Across the room was a green fire-proof filing cabinet. For something better to do, I went over and inspected it. I opened the top drawer. Fitted into the drawer were a number of red-leather folders, lettered in gold: *For Mr. Dester's Immediate Attention. For Mr. Dester's Remarks. Mr. Dester's Schedule. Mr. Dester's Notes on Current Production. Refer to Mr. Dester for Opinion.* And so on: fifteen expensive, beautifully lettered folders that proved at one time the Pacific Studios had thought a lot of Mr. Dester, even if they didn't now. The folders were empty; they were even a little dusty. I closed the drawer and opened another. A fat document in a heavy plastic sleeve lay in the otherwise empty drawer. I picked it up, turned it and read the inscription on the outside.

*The National Fidelity Assurance Company of California hereby agrees to pay*
*The sum of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars to the executors, administrators or assigns of Erle Dester (the assured) on receipt and approval at its Administrative Office in San Francisco of proofs satisfactory to the Company of the death of the assured and of the title of the claimant.*

I drew in a long, slow breath and read the inscription for the third time.

No wonder Helen wanted him dead.

A chill as cold and as creepy as the finger of death crawled up my spine.

A blonde in a cowboy shirt and blue jeans, duck waggled past the window with the arrogant knowledge that all the men lounging around were looking at her and finding what they saw pretty good.

I noticed her, but that was all. Three-quarters of a million

dollars had a bigger fascination for me than any well-made blonde in a pair of close-cut jeans.

Dester no longer represented to me a chronic alcoholic in need of pity. Sooner or later this guy would drop dead or walk in front of a car or fall out of a window. You can't fill yourself with alcohol to the point of paralysis and not run into trouble eventually, and when he was dead, bût only when he was dead, his carcass would be worth in hard cash seven hundred and fifty thousand bucks which was, in anyone's language, quite a piece of money.

The reason why Helen didn't want him to have a chauffeur now became suddenly clear to me. She knew that he would still drive the Rolls, drunk or sober, chauffeur or no chauffeur. The previous night when he had been plastered to the hairline he had been about to drive out on to the crowded boulevard if I hadn't taken over the job. She was gambling on him getting involved in an accident: a fatal accident for preference. That could be the only explanation why she had got rid of Simmonds and had tried to get rid of me.

According to Solly, Dester was heading for bankruptcy, and Solly had ways and means of knowing things like that. There appeared nothing to save him from the crash, but if he died, his wife could clear his debts and still have plenty to live on.

A slight sound behind me made me drop the policy into the drawer and look over my shoulder.

Dester was coming back to life. His fingers moved on the blotter, the fixed glare had gone out of his eyes.

I silently closed the drawer and stepped quickly across to the door.

"Are you ready to come home, sir?" I said loudly.

He blinked, shook his head, blinked again, then got me in focus.

"There you are, Nash," he said thickly. "Is it four yet?"

"It's a little after four, sir. I've been waiting."

I was surprised how quickly he came alive. He pushed back his chair, frowning. Then he looked at his wrist-watch.

"I have had a lot to do," he said. "We are pretty busy right now. I didn't realize it was as late as this."

I moved over to the desk as he got to his feet, ready to catch him. He swayed dangerously and I put out my hand and steadied him.

"My foot's gone to sleep," he muttered, leaning against me. He sat on the edge of the desk. "Where's the car?"

"Outside, in front, sir."

"Bring it around the back." He waved to a door. "I go out this way."

"Yes, sir."

I left the room, walked fast down the corridor, through the hall, feeling the eyes of the four lovelies watching me with concentrated interest, and down the steps to where I had left the car. I drove it around to the back of the building. As I got out Dester came slowly down the steps, supporting himself by hanging on to the rail.

I got him into the car with some difficulty, and he lay back, sweat on his face, his eyes half closed.

"Shall I take you home, sir?" I asked.

The effort he had made to move himself from the office to the car proved too much for him. He seemed to go off into a coma: anyway he didn't look at me nor did he reply.

I shut the car door and went around to the driver's seat. I drove down to the gate, passing a steady stream of people on their way home. They spotted the Rolls and paused to stare. I heard a girl say: "There's Dester going home: bottled as usual," and she giggled.

I slightly increased the pace, but I couldn't drive as fast as I wanted to. Other people stared; other people had remarks to make. I was sweating by the time I slowed down while the guard opened the gate.

This time he deigned to look at the car, and his eyes fell on Dester as he lay back against the cushioned head-rest, his face the colour of a rotten tomato, his eyes glazed. The guard looked at me, grimaced, then spat in the road. Maybe he had every right to feel that way about it, but I was tempted to jump out of the car and knock his teeth down his throat.

Once out on to the wide boulevard I trod on the gas, but even then people stared at the Rolls as it swept past them. They knew I was taking home a drunk; I could tell it by their jeering grins.

It was a relief to get under cover of the drive-in of Dester's residence where no one could stare. I pulled up outside the house and got out, opening the car door.

Dester sat rigid and motionless, his eyes once more fixed in that ghastly glaring stare. I tapped him on his knee.

"We're home, sir."

I might just as well have been talking into a dead mike for all the reaction I got from him.

I couldn't leave him in the car. I wasn't going to wait out

there in the hot evening sunshine. I reached in, caught hold of his coat front, hauled him out and over my shoulder in a fireman's lift.

He must have weighed over two hundred pounds, but I'm strong and I've lifted heavier things than Erle Dester, but not much heavier. I lurched up the steps, opened the front door, crossed the hall towards the stairs.

Helen called from the lounge, "Is that you, Erle? I want you."

There was a lilting jeer in her voice that told me she knew he was drunk. For a moment I hesitated, then I turned around and walked into the lounge with him like a sack of wheat over my shoulder.

She was sitting in a deep chair, a tea tray at her side, a magazine on her lap. She was wearing what is called an afternoon gown of biscuit colour chiffon. She looked very beautiful and at ease as she stared up at me, lifting her sharply arched eyebrows.

"Oh, it's you, Nash," she said, ignoring my burden. "I thought it was Mr. Dester."

I was tempted to swing him off my shoulder into her lap, but I restrained myself in time. My rôle at the moment was to be the perfect servant so she couldn't find any reason to sack me.

"Yes, madam. I heard you call. I was about to put Mr. Dester to bed. He is a little unwell."

"How considerate of you. I was hoping he might be better to-day. Well, never mind, take him away and do be careful not to drop him. When you have put him to bed, you might come down here again. I want to talk to you."

"Yes, madam."

I walked out, up the stairs and into Dester's bedroom. I laid him on the bed.

It took me a little time to undress and get him between the sheets. As soon as his head rested on the pillow, he began to snore.

I tucked him in, pulled the curtains, put a bottle of drinking water on the bedside table where he could get at it in a hurry, then went out, quietly closing the door.

I walked down the stairs, aware that my heart was beginning to beat rapidly, and entered the lounge.

I waited a moment, then said, "You wanted me, madam?"

She frowned, made an angry gesture with her hand and went on reading.

I wondered how she would have reacted if I had taken the

magazine away, jerked her out of the chair and mashed my mouth down on hers.

I waited, my eyes on her in a hard, searching stare. I examined her complexion, the shape of her ears, the colour of her lipstick, the contours of her body the way any farmer will look at any cattle he is thinking of buying.

I don't think she had bargained for this treatment. I saw the blood rise faintly to her face, and she suddenly threw down the magazine and looked up at me, her eyes glittering.

"Don't stare at me like that, you damned oaf!" she said furiously.

"I beg your pardon, madam."

"I told you last night you weren't wanted. I'm telling you again," she said, sitting forward and staring at me with angry eyes. "You now know what the job consists of. You can't like it; no one could. It is better for my husband to be without help. If he has no one to act as his nursemaid he will pull himself together. I am going to give you two hundred dollars in lieu of wages, and you're to pack and go immediately."

I didn't say anything.

She had risen to her feet. She walked over to the desk, took from a drawer two one-hundred-dollar bills and threw them on the table.

"Take them and get out!"

That's what I should have done, but, of course, I didn't.

"I take my orders from Mr. Dester, madam. So long as he needs me, I am staying."

I turned and started for the exit.

"Nash! Come back here!"

I kept going, reached the hall, opened the front door and walked down the steps into the sunlight.

## CHAPTER THREE

WITH my jacket off and my collar undone, a cigarette between my fingers, I lay on the bed and bent my mind to the situation as I knew it so far.

It was obvious that Helen was waiting for Dester to die, and she was getting impatient with the wait. I could understand that: seven hundred and fifty thousand was a tantalizing sum to wait for.

It seemed, if I could believe Simmonds and Jack Solly, that before very long Dester would be in financial trouble if he wasn't there already. The premium of a life policy as big as the one he held would cost a lot of dough: at a guess it would knock his income back something like eight or maybe ten thousand dollars a year. It didn't seem likely that he could continue to dish out that kind of money. I wished now that I had had time to examine the policy and find out when the next premium was due. It was more than probable he wouldn't be able to pay it and if he couldn't, the policy would lapse. Unless there was a special clause in the policy, there would then be no three-quarters of a million for Helen if he died. She probably knew that, and that was why she was so anxious to get rid of me. It seemed to me she was relying on Dester killing himself in a car smash before the premium had to be paid.

But now she had failed to get rid of me, and the chances of Dester having a car smash were remote, what was she going to do? She had only a certain amount of time before the premium fell due, so she couldn't afford to wait for him to drink himself to death. What I wanted to know was whether she wanted that money badly enough to hurry his death along.

I remembered what Solly had said: *another guy threw himself out of a window because of her.*

I had a hunch that this other guy might give me the key to the present setup. If I could find out who he had been and why he had thrown himself out of the window I might be able to assess better just how far she would go to get her hands on the money.

How could I find this out?

Dester had met her in New York. Presumably this other guy had thrown himself out of a window somewhere in New York.

It looked to me as if I would need outside help on this job. The obvious way to get the dope on this other guy would be to hire an inquiry agent, but inquiry agents cost money.

I suddenly snapped upright. Why was I all this interested? I asked myself. Why was I suddenly so determined to stick my nose into something that didn't concern me? I knew the answer, of course, but I didn't like admitting even to myself what the answer was.

When I had found that Helen would collect three-quarters of a million dollars at Dester's death, a gnawing envy had taken hold of me. I began to ask myself if there was any chance to horn in and get a share of this money. I knew I had no claim to it, but it seemed to me that if Helen was planning to hurry Dester's death along, then I had a claim. If I could prove she had hurried his death along, I would have a hold on her. I knew the word for that kind of thing, but I wanted some of that money so badly I didn't flinch from the word.

At the moment I was on the outside, looking in. I was like a member of a theatre audience. The curtain was up; the actors and actresses were on the stage, the plot was beginning to unfold, but I had no part in it. Somehow I had to get up on to that stage and join in the action.

It seemed to me that it was time to have a straight talk with myself, to examine my conscience and find out just how far I would go for a share in that money. This was between me and me, and if I couldn't be frank with myself, I couldn't be frank with anyone.

Everything depended, of course, on the share I was going to get. The bigger the share, the bigger the risk I would be prepared to take. How much could I grab without causing too much opposition? Half? A quarter?

I remembered one of Solly's many sales slogans: *Always ask for twice as much as you expect: you may surprise yourself and get it.*

Then I would go for half: three hundred and fifty grand.

I lay staring up at the ceiling as I tried to visualize what it would mean to have all that money. The most money I had ever earned in a year was four thousand bucks, and that was in the hey-day of the boom and I had sweated my guts out to earn it.

Three hundred and fifty thousand!

It set my heart hammering to think of all that money. It would change my life. How far would I go, how much would I risk to put my hands on that much money?

A word jumped into my mind and I flinched from it. Then I remembered I was being frank with myself.

Murder?

Would I commit murder for such a sum?

It was one thing to lie on this bed and contemplate murdering Dester for that money, but another thing to do it. Even if I could screw up enough guts to do it, there was the risk.

If he were murdered, the first person the police would suspect would be Helen. I had a fair idea how a policeman's mind would work on a set up like this. He would reason Helen wanted to get rid of her husband to get the insurance money. He'd figure she was unlikely to do the actual killing herself. He would look around for the other man, and he would spot me.

Then there was the insurance company to think of. They wouldn't pay out all that dough without a fight. Their own dicks were tougher, smarter and a lot more dangerous than the police.

No, murder was too risky: straightforward murder that is, but how about murder by remote control? As Helen was planning it? It was easy enough. Dester had only to take the car out when he was full of liquor or walk into a stream of fast-moving traffic and that would be that. That seemed better to me, but suppose he didn't take the car out or walk across a street when he was plastered? How long had I got before the premium was due? That was the vital point.

Helen must know that time was pressing. Wouldn't it be the smart thing for me to do to wait for her to get rid of Dester, keep clear of it, and then move in and make her part with half?

That brought me back to the guy who had fallen out of a window. Was this something in her past that I could hook her with? Then I suddenly thought of Solly. He had contacts in New York. He might be able to get me the dope if I could persuade him to take the trip.

I looked at my watch. It was just after seven o'clock. I couldn't imagine that Dester would be going out this night. The sooner I talked to Solly the better. I picked up the telephone and called his apartment.

There was a delay before he answered.

"I want to talk to you, Jack," I said. "Can you meet me at Sam's bar in half an hour?"

"Not to-night I can't. I've got me a heavy date. What's biting you?"

"Nothing's biting me, but plenty will bite you if you don't hustle over to Sam's bar."

There was a pause while he wrestled with himself, then I heard him heave a sigh.

"Well, okay, if you snap it up I can still keep my date. I don't have to meet her for another hour."

"Sam's bar in twenty minutes or faster," I said and hung up.

I changed into my suit and started down the drive at a fast clip. I would have liked to borrow one of the cars, but I wasn't going to ask permission, and I knew it would be unsafe if I didn't ask permission.

Solly was impatiently waiting for me as I came into the bar. I took him to the end booth against the wall where we could talk without being overheard and told the waiter to bring us a couple of highballs.

"What's this about?" he asked as soon as the waiter had put the drinks in front of us and had moved away.

"Yeah. Now listen: you remember what you said about Mrs. Dester? About a guy who threw himself out of a window because of her?"

Solly grimaced. "Yeah, but what's that got to do with me? Look, if you've brought me here . . ."

"Take it easy," I said, patting his arm. "Who told you about this guy?"

"Search me," Solly said, shrugging. "People tell me things all the time. I wouldn't know."

"Was it true?"

"I guess so. What are you getting so excited about? What's Mrs. Dester to do with this proposition of yours?"

"Do you know for certain this guy fell out of a window?"

He stared at me. "Does anyone know anything for certain? What is all this about?"

I sat back, drank some of the highball while I looked at him. "How would you like to pick up five hundred bucks?" I asked.

He scratched the side of his beaky nose with a dirty fingernail. "Are you kidding?"

"This isn't the time to kid. There's five C's waiting for you if you're prepared to make yourself useful."

"Is this some racket?" Solly asked, his eyes hard. "Now look, you . . ."

"I know, I know. Let me do the talking, will you? I'm offering you the chance to get in on something on the ground floor, but you must be prepared to gamble with me and you must also

be prepared to do some preliminary work before you cash in."

"I don't think I like the sound of this," he said slowly. "You can't lay your hands on five bucks let alone five hundred. What the hell gives? Look, I'm passing up a good date because I thought you meant business . . ."

"I know," I interrupted. "Coming from me it sounds nuts, but it isn't anything like as nutty as it sounds. The point is how much do you want to know about it?"

He shifted impatiently.

"How much do I want to know? I want to know the whole works, of course."

I stared at him. "Sure you do?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I want some information about Helen Dester," I said, lowering my voice. "I think you can get this information. When I've got it, I'll be in a position to pay you five hundred, but not before." I paused to stare at him again. "Now do you want to know the whole works?"

He started to say something, then the nickel dropped and his hatchet face tightened. "Now wait a minute. That kind of racket is dynamite. A blackmailer . . ."

"Shut up, pea brain! Who's talking about blackmail?" I said, keeping my voice down. "I'm offering you five hundred dollars to dig into Helen Dester's past and to turn over to me what you find. I didn't say anything about blackmail."

"I've had one run in with the cops, Glyn," he said, "I can't risk another."

"Who's talking about the cops?" I said curtly. "But if that's the way you feel I can get someone else to do the job."

He studied me, then shrugged. "Okay, I could use five C's. Just what do I do to earn it?"

"I want the complete dope on the guy who fell out of the window, and when I say complete, I mean complete. Who he was, why he fell out, the coroner's verdict, who was with him when he fell out and how he figured in Helen's life. Get it? I want the works. Then I want a detailed picture of Helen's background. You'll have to go to New York and dig, but you won't be wasting your time."

"And what's going to happen to my business while I'm in New York?" Solly demanded.

"You should care. Patsy can handle it. This is important. You know as well as I do it would take you a month of hard grind to make five hundred in your business. I'm offering you

that amount for a few days' work."

"Yeah, it sounds fine, but when do I get the dough?"

"If I pull this trick you'll get it. If I don't pull it, then we're both unlucky."

"And in the meantime I've had to pay out for a trip to New York."

"For the love of mike! If that's the way you feel about it, then let's skip it."

He took a long pull from his glass.

"I don't like any of it. That sort of racket could land us both in jail."

"What sort of racket?" I said, staring at him.

"You know what I mean. Don't pull a little Eva on me."

"What are you worrying about? All I'm asking you to do is to supply me with some information. In return for the information I'll give you five C's, and your fare. You don't know why I want the information or where the five C's have come from. How can it get you into trouble?"

He turned this over in his mind. It seemed to soothe him. "But what about you? You could . . ."

"I can look after myself. Are you going to handle the job or aren't you?"

He shrugged.

"Well, okay, I'll see what I can dig up. If I get you the information I don't want to know how you're going to use it. You've got to keep me out of trouble."

"I'll do that. Will you get off to-morrow morning? I want this dope fast, and when I say fast, I mean fast."

He finished his drink and got to his feet.

"You'll get it. I'll call you. What's your number?"

"No. I'll call you. I'll call you at nine o'clock on Friday morning at your apartment. Okay?"

"Yeah, but watch your step. I don't think you realize how serious this could be for you. I hope you know what you are doing."

I grinned at him.

After Solly had gone, I had a quick supper and then took the bus back to the Desters' residence.

The Cadillac had gone. With Helen out of the way, I thought it might pay dividends to see how Dester was getting along.

He was lying in bed. A bottle of Scotch and a glass half-full of whisky stood on the night table. He was looking towards me,

his face set, his eyes bloodshot. He had a .38 automatic in his hand. I saw it distinctly before he slid his hand and the gun out of sight under the sheet.

"What do you want?" he said, his voice harsh. "Can't you knock before you come in?"

The sight of the gun rattled me, and I wondered if he knew Helen was waiting for him to die. Was he scared of her? Did he have the gun handy as a protection against attack?

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, standing in the doorway. "I thought you might be sleeping. I just wanted to know if you were going out to-night."

I saw him relax. "Come in, kid," he said. "I won't be going out to-night. I'm not feeling too well."

I shut the door and moved to the foot of the bed. It gave me a queer feeling to look at this man who I knew, dead, was worth three-quarters of a million dollars.

"Has Mrs. Dester gone out?" he asked abruptly, reaching for his glass.

"Yes, sir; at least the Cadillac's gone."

"She didn't say where she was going?"

"No, sir."

He finished the whisky and splashed more into his glass. His hand was so unsteady he spilt some of the whisky on the sheet.

"I think you should know that Mrs. Dester doesn't want me here," I went on. "She has told me twice to go."

He smiled: a hard, bitter smile. "That doesn't surprise me, kid. You take your orders from me."

"Yes, sir."

"Pay no attention to what she says. I want you here; I want you to handle the Rolls."

"Yes, sir."

He lay back against the pillow, staring at me.

"Are you married, kid?"

"No, sir."

"You're smart. Don't ever marry. I wouldn't be a goddamn drunk if I had kept clear of marriage." He made a movement with his hand. "She's lovely, isn't she? All a man could want. You wouldn't think a woman as beautiful as she is could be colder than an iceberg, would you? But she is. There is only one thing she ever thinks about and that's money. Are you interested in money?"

I had to lick my lips before saying, "Who isn't?"

"Yes, but there are degrees of interest. I'm interested in

money too, but I don't live for it. She does." He drank some more whisky. "She's waiting for me to die. She thinks she'll come into a lot of money when I'm dead." He laughed; it wasn't a pleasant sound. "But she's going to get a shock. All she's going to get is a parcel of debts. That's all. I'm going to see to that."

I didn't say anything, but I was listening. I told myself this could only mean the premium was about due and he wasn't going to renew the policy.

Suddenly he seemed to realize what he had been saying. His face hardened and he shouted at me, "Don't stand there staring at me! Go away! I want to be alone, and don't come in here without knocking again."

Well, the visit to his room may not have paid off in dividends, but it certainly gave me something to think about.

Punctually at half past ten the next morning, Dester came from the house down to the car. He seemed comparatively sober, but his face was fine drawn, and there were dark circles around his eyes. He moved slowly as if he wasn't quite sure of his footing.

"I'm not going to the studios this morning," he said as he climbed into the car. "Take me to the airport. I'm catching the half past eleven plane to San Francisco."

"Yes, sir," I said.

Why was he going to San Francisco? I wondered as I drove to the airport. I remembered the Head Office of the National Fidelity Assurance Company was in San Francisco. I would have given a lot to have asked him right out what he was going to do, but that wouldn't have got me anything but the gate.

I pulled up outside the airport entrance, got out of the car and held the door open for him.

"I'll be at the studios around four o'clock, kid," he said. "Pick me up there." He sat still looking at me, then he went "How are you off for money?"

Although I was surprised, I said fast enough, "Well, sir, I'm a little hard up right now. If you could . . ." I stopped and let the rest of the sentence hang in the air.

He smiled. "What did I say I'd pay you?"

"Fifty, sir."

He took a cheque book from his pocket. Then he looked at me, his smile turning bitter.

"You'd better cash in, kid, while there's something left. It

won't be long now before the rest of them are after it." He wrote out a cheque and handed it to me. "That's a year's salary. Don't walk out on me now, will you? Stick with me until the smash comes. It won't be long."

I looked at the cheque, scarcely believing my eyes. He had made it out for two thousand, six hundred dollars.

"You'd better cash it fast," he went on. "Don't hang on to it. First come, first served. In a few days there won't be a nickel left."

"Yes, sir," I said, "but I hope this doesn't mean ..." I left it hanging because I didn't want a snub.

"It means exactly this," he said, smiling at me. "My contract runs out on Saturday, and it isn't going to be renewed. Don't you read the gossip columns? It's no secret. I'm washed-up. I'm a drunk, kid, and no one wants a drunk these days. That means on Saturday I stay home. I owe money everywhere. They'll sell me up. The house, the cars: everything will go. I'r up to my eyes in debts. So long as I remain chief producer of th Pacific Picture Corporation, my creditors will hold off becaus they always hope for a miracle, but at the end of the week, whe I've quit, they'll move in like a flock of vultures." He got out o the car and stood staring up at the blue sky, feeling the sun o his face. "What do I care? I've had fun. I've travelled. I'v owned a Rolls. I've married the loveliest woman in Hollywood What more can a guy want? Now it's time to pay up: that' okay. I'll pay what I can, and they'll have to whistle for th rest of it." He put his hand on my shoulder and gently rocke me to and fro, not looking at me, but beyond me, his mouth in hard, bitter smile. "And she's going to be one of them who' have to whistle. That's the only way I can get even with her fc leading me the life she has led me. Even now I would get dow on hands and knees and lick her shoes for one kind word fro her." He shifted his eyes so he looked right at me. "Corny dia logue, isn't it, kid? Right out of a B picture. Listen, I've neve struck a spark from her: not once. What was it Hemingwa said? The earth never moved for us. Know what I mean Loving her was as sordid and as horrifying as loving a dea body." He turned abruptly and walked into the reception hal

I got back into the car, lit a cigarette and drove slowly dow the drive-in and on to the highway. To get his tragic, hopele face out of my mind I forced myself to think of the three hu dred and fifty grand I might pick up if he died. But someho I didn't get a bang out of it as I should have done.

I had snapped out of my mood by the time I got into town. At least I now had something for my trouble. Two thousand six hundred dollars wasn't a bad start. I parked the car and took out his cheque and looked to see where his bank was. I was going to take his advice and cash the cheque right now.

The teller at Dester's bank looked surprised when I pushed the cheque across the counter. He went away to the back and I saw him checking a ledger. Finally he convinced himself and he paid over the money.

I took it to a bank across the way and opened an account for myself. It was nice to own a cheque book again.

I drove back to the house, changed out of my uniform and, having nothing better to do, I got out the big power-mower and settled down to a long spell of lawn cutting.

It wasn't until after one o'clock when I decided I'd better dig up some lunch for myself that I saw Helen coming from the house.

She came to the edge of the lawn and waited. I manoeuvred the mower so that I should pass close to her and as I came up to her I cut the engine.

"Did you want me, madam?"

"I want you to take me to the Palm Grove Club to-night and then pick me up at one o'clock. Mr. Dester won't be going out."

I met her eyes and I got a shock. The hostility I had expected to see wasn't there. Instead the green eyes were warm.

"I don't like driving at night," she went on. "You needn't wear your uniform, Nash. As you will have a long wait, you might care to take in a movie or something."

I was so surprised I just stared at her.

"And, Nash, since you insist on staying here, it might be amusing for both of us if we become more amicable."

The long, slow look she gave me could only mean one thing. I've kicked around long enough with all kinds of women not to recognize that look and the invitation that lay behind it.

"Yes, madam," I said.

She suddenly smiled, and the smile made her look younger and even more lovely.

My heart was pounding as I watched her walk away towards the garage.

# CHAPTER FOUR

I HAVE a way with women: some men have. It's a talent. You've either got it or you haven't, and you soon know if you have it. I found I had it when I was a kid of fifteen. I'm thirty-three now, and during those eighteen, years, I may not have been a ball of fire in anything else I did, but I did have a lot of success with women.

So this sudden change in Helen's attitude didn't come as a complete surprise: it had just come quicker than I thought it was going to come, but I had had no doubt that sooner or later it would come. My confidence was based on experience. It was because other women, some as hostile as Helen, had suddenly capitulated at the most unexpected time, that I wasn't suspicious of this move of Helen's as I might have been.

Around three o'clock I took the Rolls down town and parked it, then I went to an outfitters who were showing some reasonably priced, but well-cut suits and got myself a complete outfit. I'm easy to fit, and the pin-head grey I finally selected could have been made for me. I bought a white nylon shirt, a snappy tie, socks and a pair of reverse calf shoes. While the stuff was being parcelled, I went over to my bank, drew out enough to cover the bill and went back to the outfitters and settled up.

I put the parcel in the boot of the Rolls. By that time it was coming up for four. I drove over to the studios for Dester.

He wasn't as drunk as I hoped he would be, although he was drunk enough. But there was no chance to get at the insurance policy.

"Come in, kid," he said as I knocked on the door that stood open. "There's some stuff I want you to put in the car."

In a corner were a couple of suit-cases and tied up with string were the fifteen empty leather folders.

As I went over to them, he turned to the filing cabinet, opened the second drawer and took out the policy. I watched him out of the corner of my eye as he looked at it, then he put it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

That was that. He would probably lock it up in the wall safe I had noticed in his bedroom. I had had my chance when I had first looked at it. It didn't seem as if I would get another chance to examine it.

I put the suit-cases in the boot alongside my parcel and returned to the office.

"Is that the lot, sir?"

"For the time being," he said and opened the big wall closet. There were about three dozen full bottles of whisky standing on one of the shelves: the rest of the shelves were lined with empty bottles. At a guess there would be close on a hundred of them. "I'll take the full ones on Friday," he went on. "I'll leave the empty ones. They can be my epitaph. Let's go."

"I understand you won't be needing me to-night, sir," I said as I opened the car door. "Mrs. Dester asked me to drive her to the Palm Grove."

"Did she?" He stared at me. "How odd. I wonder why. She likes to drive herself. Now I wonder why she wants you to take her to the Palm Grove?"

I wondered too. "She said something about not caring to drive in the dark," I said.

"Did she say that? Well, well, but never mind. What does it matter? No, I won't want you to-night. I have some writing to do."

When we reached the house, I carried the suit-cases into his study. He had gone upstairs, and as I was crossing the hall, Helen came out of the lounge.

"At eight o'clock, Nash, please," she said.

"Yes, madam."

Our eyes met and she smiled. I had seen that kind of smile before, and again I felt my heartbeat quicken.

"You won't wear your uniform, will you?"

"You said not, madam."

"Yes, of course."

At eight o'clock, I drove the Cadillac to the front door. I had spent the past hour shaving, taking a shower and putting on my new clothes. I was pretty pleased with the result.

As I leaned forward to cut the engine, the front door opened and Helen came out. She was wearing a white frock: a simple thing, not the kind of getup I would have expected her to wear at a ritzy joint like the Palm Grove, and that surprised me. She came down the steps looking very lovely and got into the car without even glancing at me.

The Cadillac was a two-seater with a bucket seat at the back and she sat next to the driver's seat. I closed the door, went around and got in beside her.

"Palm Grove, madam?"

"No; I've changed my mind. The Foot-hills Club, please."

The Foot-hills Club was out Mount Wilson way and that was quite a drive. Her change of mind should have warned me what was in the wind, but somehow the nickel didn't drop. It dropped all right later, but it didn't then. Maybe having her so close to me, the sleeve of her dress against the sleeve of my jacket, the smell of her perfume, seeing the shape of her thighs under the folds of her skirt threw me off balance: the silent powerful weapons a woman has that can make a monkey out of any man.

The Foot-hills Club was used mostly by jive enthusiasts. I had been out there several times with Solly who was a keen jive fan. The advantage of the club was that it was cheap, the food good and the band superlative. Not the kind of joint one would have expected Mrs. Erle Dester to go to.

"Do you dance, Nash?" she asked suddenly as I swung the car through the gateway on to the avenue.

"Yes, madam."

"For goodness' sake stop calling me madam."

"Yes, Mrs. Dester."

"That's better." She half turned in her seat to look at me. "I couldn't face the Palm Grove to-night," she went on. "I felt I wanted something with some snap in it. Do you ever feel like that?"

"Every so often."

"I thought we might dance. None of my stuffy men friends would be seen dead at the Foot-hills Club."

I didn't say anything.

We drove for a little while in silence, then she said abruptly, "Tell me something about yourself. Why did you take this job? A man like you – surely you could find something better?"

"Why should I want anything better? You're the loveliest woman in Hollywood. I'm going dancing. This is a new Cadillac and I've just been paid. What more could I want?"

She laughed, reached forward and turned on the radio. She picked up Pee-Wee Hunt doing his stuff in a jam session.

"What were you before you became my husband's chauffeur?" she asked as she adjusted the volume control.

"It wouldn't interest you," I said, looking straight ahead. "Let's keep this free of personalities, shall we? You want to dance: I want to dance. That's about it, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said and turned her head to watch the traffic that was hedging us in on all sides.

She was a good dancer, and to have her in my arms, feeling her breasts against my chest, her hair against my face, her long legs touching mine, gave me a bang I thought I had got beyond feeling.

The restaurant was pretty crowded with bobby-soxers and their kid friends. Most of the boys forgot who they were dancing with when they saw Helen.

We danced maybe for half an hour, then she said it was time for a drink.

"Are you feeling very rich, Nash, or shall I pay?" she asked as we moved to the bar.

"I'm rich enough to buy you a drink. What'll it be?"

"A brandy. While you're ordering it, I'm going to put my face straight." She gave me that long, bold stare again. "I didn't think I was going to enjoy this as much as I am."

"This is only the beginning of it," I said. "The night lies ahead of us."

"Yes." Her fingers tightened on my arm. "The night lies ahead of us."

I watched her walk down the aisle that led to the Ladies' Rest Room and I felt a little heady.

I had an idea that this was going to be one of those nights when things go right. In the past there have been nights when things didn't go right. I have second sight about that kind of thing. I know when it isn't going the way I have planned it to go, and this night, I felt it was going right.

I went over to a table on the terrace where I could see the door of the Ladies' Room and snapped my fingers at a waiter. I ordered a brandy and a double whisky.

It wasn't until twenty minutes had crawled by that I began to wonder. Another ten minutes had me on my feet. Surely she couldn't take half an hour to put her face straight?

I waited another five minutes, then I got hold of a cigarette-girl. I gave her a buck and told her to look in the Ladies' Rest Room and let me know if a redhead in a white dress was still working on herself.

That took another five minutes.

The cigarette-girl came back and said there was no redhead now. The girl in charge had told her the redhead had gone out the back way the moment she had come into the Rest Room.

That was when the nickel dropped and I saw how I had been taken for a ride.

I was now forty minutes' hard driving from Dester's residence, if I had a car, that is, for I was pretty sure she had taken the Cadillac. She had a good start on me, but I wasn't licked yet.

I ran around to the parking lot.

There was no Cadillac.

But there was a 1945 Buick pulling out from a line of cars. I didn't hesitate. I ran over to the car, waving my arms.

The driver, a kid in an open-neck, green-and-white check shirt, pulled up and stared at me.

"Look, this is important," I said. "I've got to get to Hill Crest Avenue fast. I'll give you five bucks to get me there. How about it?"

"Sure," he said. "I was only going home." He reached over and pushed open the off-side door. "Get in. For five bucks I'd drive you to Los Angeles and back."

"If you can make it in half an hour, I'll give you ten bucks," I said.

He grinned at me. "You've lost your dough. Hold on to your hat. Here we go!"

Although the Buick was born in 1945, it could move and the kid could drive. He was smart enough to know he couldn't hope to make the journey in time if he kept to the highway with the evening traffic at its peak. He took to the side roads: working his way down to Hill Crest Avenue by a series of rushes from one back street to another. He didn't quite manage to get me to the gates of Dester's house in thirty minutes, but he was only five minutes on the wrong side so I gave him the ten bucks.

I ran up the drive towards the house. As I reached the bend in the drive I saw there was a light on in the garage. I pulled up sharply and stepped behind a tree. From where I was I could see into the garage.

I waited, then I spotted Helen as she came from the back of the garage into the light.

What was she up to? I could see the Rolls and the Buick were in the garage. The Cadillac was parked on the tarmac. She paused by the Buick, her back turned to me. Cautiously I moved forward until I was within fifteen yards of her. Then I saw Dester.

He was lying on the garage floor, face down, and for a long, frightening moment I thought she had been crazy enough to have killed him.

She moved over to him, turned him over on his back, and I saw he was breathing. She took hold of him and hauled him to his feet. She handled him as if he weighed nothing at all.

That shook me. I had carried him to his bedroom and I knew what he weighed. She must have been as strong as an ox to have handled him the way she was handling him.

Dester lolled against her. The light fell on his face. His eyes were open and glazed; his jaw sagged.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" he mumbled, trying to push her away. "Take your hands off me. I'm going out, and no one's going to stop me."

A smile came to Helen's mouth: an awful little smile that made my flesh creep.

"Of course, darling," she said. "I'm not going to stop you. I'm trying to help you."

She opened the off-side door of the Buick. She wasn't missing a trick. Why smash up a Rolls when you had something cheaper to use?

This was it.

She intended to drive him down to the gates, put his hands on the steering wheel and launch him on to the avenue. At the end of the avenue, down the steep hill, was the main highway, crammed with fast-moving traffic.

At first glance it looked fool-proof. If one of those fast-moving cars on the highway caught the Buick as it came out of the avenue the chances of Dester surviving were slight. Most of the people in Hollywood knew he was an alcoholic. They knew he drove when he was drunk. There was nothing in the setup to make the insurance company suspicious.

Or was there?

I remembered he had gone to San Francisco that morning. Had he fixed something with the insurance company? It flashed into my mind that there were loose ends, and you can't afford to have a single loose end when dealing with an insurance company.

Suppose he wasn't killed outright? The Buick was big and solid. It would take a lot of smashing. If he wasn't dead when the cops reached him, he might talk. If he told them his wife had helped him into the car, and later, they found out – as they were certain to find out – that he was insured for three-quarters of a million dollars, that would be that.

It wouldn't take the police long to find out Helen and I had been to the Foot-hills Club. What would they think when they discovered that she and I – her husband's chauffeur – had been dancing together? That would put me on the spot. The kid would tell them I had been left high and dry without a car and

had been anxious enough to get back to the house to give him ten bucks for the trip. The police would want to know why; they would want to know why Helen had sneaked away. If I didn't come clean, they might think I was also in the plot. Even if they didn't grab Helen on an attempted murder rap, even if they didn't try to tie me into the rap too, the insurance company would be tipped off and she would never dare try again; and if she didn't try again, I wouldn't get my share of the money.

I was suddenly certain that this wasn't the way to do it. If Dester had to die, something much more certain and foolproof had to be thought up. There was too much hanging on his death to take any risk: too much risk to take any chances.

As Helen walked around to the driving seat, I came out of the shadows and stepped into the light.

She must have had nerves like steel. She didn't start nor cry out. The hard glare of the light fell fully on her face; except for a slight tightening of her mouth, there was no change of expression.

She moved slowly towards me.

"Oh, Nash, Mr. Dester insists on being driven to the Crescent Club," she said quietly. "I was going to take him, but now you are here, you had better."

The lie was as smooth as silk. If I hadn't known better I would have fallen for it.

"Yes, madam," I said, and I wished I had as good control over my face as she had over hers. My voice sounded husky, and I must have shown how rattled I was.

I stepped past her to the Buick, got into the car and started the engine. She turned and walked away, disappearing into the darkness.

Dester suddenly straightened up.

"Don't drive out," he said sharply. He spoke in his normal voice and that shook me.

I turned to stare at him.

"She wanted to get you out of the way, of course," he said. "How did you get back?"

I continued to stare at him, aware that cold sweat was beading my face.

He smiled crookedly at me. "Don't look as if you've seen a ghost," he said. "How did you get back?"

"A guy gave me a lift," I said, and my voice sounded like the croak of a frog.

"I had an idea she wanted to get rid of me," he said. "She's

after the insurance money, of course." He laughed. "You wouldn't think a woman as lovely as she is could be so ruthless, would you?" He produced a cigarette and lit it. "Well, now I know where I stand." He opened the car door and got out. "I think after all that excitement I'll go to bed. I want you to sleep in my dressing-room to-night, kid. You never know: now she has started, she might try to finish it. I don't want her to be tempted to suffocate me while I'm asleep."

I knew I had to try to behave as any normal man would have behaved when he heard a thing like this.

"But aren't you going to call the police?" I said.

"The police?" He laughed. "Of course not. She's only after the insurance money. I'm taking good care she doesn't get it, and once she realizes that she'll leave me alone."

*I'm taking good care she doesn't get it.*

I very nearly gave myself away.

What did he mean?

"Let's go back to the house," he went on and moved off across the tarmac.

I turned off the garage light, ran upstairs, snatched up my pyjamas and shaving kit, then went after him.

Together, we entered the still, silent house.

As we came up the stairs, Helen appeared in the doorway of her bedroom.

The sight of Dester with me behind him jolted her. Her face lost colour and her hand went up to her throat.

"Nash's sleeping in my dressing-room," Dester said. "He's keeping an eye on me. You might like to know in case you felt you should see how I am during the night."

He moved past her into his bedroom.

I paused at the head of the stairs to look at her.

We stared at each other for a long moment. I could see the naked hatred in her eyes. Then she turned and shut the bedroom door in my face.

I didn't sleep much that night. I kept thinking of what he had said about making sure Helen wouldn't get the insurance money. That had me worried for he had spoken with conviction. Was it possible that the premium was already overdue? It would be a joke on me if the policy wasn't worth anything now: and a joke on her too.

There seemed no way I could find out what he had done. I wondered if I should go to Helen and put my cards on the

table. She might know more than I did, but I finally decided this wasn't the time to show her what my game was going to be.

Although I spent most of the night worrying my brain crooked, it didn't get me anywhere, and I was glad when I could get up and stop thinking.

I drove Dester down to the studios as usual. He didn't say much on the way down, and he didn't refer to what had happened the previous night, but as he got out of the car, he said, "I want you to move into the house, kid. Use my dressing-room from now on. Get your things over. I want you to keep close to me all the time I'm in the house. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

I kept clear of the house all that day, and at four I went back to the studios to pick him up.

I could see he had been drinking heavily, and he seemed in a depressed mood. He got into the car without a word and I took him back to the house.

He told me he was going out for dinner, and I was to be ready at eight o'clock.

The house felt empty. There was no sign of Helen. As I lay on my bed, smoking and waiting for eight o'clock to come around, the only sound I could hear was Dester lurching about in his bedroom while he changed.

When I brought the car to the front door, he came down the steps, heavy footed and slow. He was in evening dress, and in spite of his puffy, raw face and his bloodshot eyes, he still looked an imposing figure.

"The Crescent Club," he said, "and stick around, kid. I'll have to be carried to bed to-night. I'm going to celebrate."

I didn't ask him what he was going to celebrate, and he didn't tell me. I had a book with me and I sat in the car in the club's parking lot and read.

Around one o'clock one of the swank doormen came out of the shadows.

"Come and pick up your drunk," he said. "We've got him propped up against the wall, but he's not going to stay like that for long."

I put my book away and drove around to the side door with the doorman trotting beside the car.

Dester was about as drunk as I had seen him, and it took the doorman and I all we could do to get him into the car.

"I hope this is the last time I see this lush," the doorman said, stepping back and wiping his face with the back of his

hand. "I hear he's been kicked out of the Pacific."

"Why should you worry?" I said, getting back into the car. "Your joint sells him the liquor, doesn't it?"

I drove back to the dark, silent house. Passing the garage I saw Helen had taken the Cadillac out. I wondered where she had gone.

I had to carry Dester up to his bedroom. As I laid him on his bed, he grunted, then passed out.

I made sure he was asleep before I went over to the wall safe. I gave the handle a tentative tug, but the safe was locked.

I looked through the drawers in the bureau and in most of the likely places; I went through his pockets after I had undressed him, but the key didn't show.

I kept looking, but I didn't find it, and finally I turned off the light and went into the dressing-room, leaving the communicating door open.

I got undressed, turned out the light and lit a cigarette while I lay and looked out at the big moon and wondered what Solly would have to tell me in the morning. The whole setup seemed to be slipping through my fingers. Twice I had saved Dester's life. Maybe I was crazy to have stopped Helen from putting him in the Buick and letting him out into the traffic. The trick might have worked, and if it had, by now, I should be bargaining with her for my share.

Then I remembered the loose ends. I thought of the police and how they would handle us, and I was glad I had stopped it.

I got up soon after half past seven the next morning, looked into Dester's room and saw he was still asleep. I let myself out of the silent house and went to the apartment over the garage. After I had shaved and made myself a cup of coffee, I put a call through to Solly's apartment.

He answered after a delay.

"For sweet Pete's sake!" he moaned. "You woke me up. Damn it! You said nine o'clock."

"Did you dig up anything?"

"I said I would, didn't I? Let's get together some time to-day. And listen, you bring the five hundred bucks or I don't give."

"Come over here. I don't know if I'll be needed to-day so I'll have to stick around. We can talk here."

He said he would come after he had had breakfast and not before. I told him I'd have something for him here, and to get out his car and come right away. Grudgingly he said he'd be

over, and forty minutes later I spotted him walking up the drive. At least he had had the sense to leave his car somewhere out of sight.

"You're a lucky guy," he said, sitting down at my table. "That job could have taken me a week, but I ran into a newspaper guy I knew in the old days, and he had the whole thing at his finger-ends."

I put eggs and ham in front of him. I didn't feel like eating myself, but I poured a cup of coffee.

"Let's have it," I said. "What did you find out?"

"How about something on account if you haven't got the five hundred here?"

"You can have a hundred if that's any good to you."

He wasn't expecting that, and he stared at me pop-eyed.

"You haven't started anything yet, have you?" he asked anxiously.

"What do you mean?"

"How did you get the money? Look, pal, this business worries me. If you're going to put the bite on this woman . . ."

"Will you relax?" I said. "Dester's paid me. He gave me an advance." I took out my cheque book. "So I can let you have a hundred."

"Not by cheque you won't," he said hurriedly. "That's okay. I'll trust you. When you pay me, I want it in cash."

"I don't believe you'd trust your own mother."

"I did once, and she gypped me out of fifty bucks," he said, scowling. "I don't know what game you're playing, but I do know any dough I get from you is going to be in small bills and not by cheque."

"Okay, okay, now tell me what you have found out."

"I was lucky. I ran into this newspaper guy by chance. His name's Mike Stevens, and he's on the *World Telegram*. He's a smart reporter and I thought it might pay off if I told him what I wanted to find out, and it did. He covered the case himself. The guy who fell out of the window was Herbert Van Tomlin: he was in the fur trade; an agent or something – a one-man show like mine, only he made it pay. He was a bachelor, had a small apartment on Park Avenue, ran a Cadillac, and when he wasn't working, he was having himself a good time. It came out at the inquest that he met your Mrs. Dester at the Fi-Fi Club: she was a cigarette-girl there. She took Van Tomlin's eye and he propositioned her. He suggested he should set her up in an apartment in return for the usual favours. She agreed, and

he got her an apartment on the eighth floor on Riverside Drive.

"Van Tomlin wasn't a chicken. He was nudging sixty, and, according to Stevens, he was crazy about the girl. She was then known as Helen Lowson. She cost him most of his spending money." Solly paused to finish his ham, then shoved his plate away and lit a cigarette. "Van Tomlin saw Helen nearly every night," he went on. "They went around the night spots together, and he spent more than he was earning. One night when he was in Helen's apartment, he had a heart attack. For a short time it was nip and tuck. She got a doctor in, and later this doctor gave evidence at the inquest. Stevens said anyone could see the doctor had been given the treatment by her. At the inquest, he couldn't say enough in her favour. His evidence turned the trick when the showdown came.

"When Van Tomlin recovered from the attack, he took out an insurance policy in Helen's favour for twenty grand."

I felt the blood drain out of my face when he said that, and I got up and went over to the far side of the room, my back to him while I poured out more coffee. I didn't want him to see that bit of information had jolted me down to the heels.

So she had been already mixed up in an insurance case! That put her right out on a limb. Insurance companies tip each other off. It was a safe bet that Dester's insurance company knew by now that his wife had been hooked into a previous insurance investigation.

Solly went on talking: "Van Tomlin didn't want her to be left high and dry if anything happened to him. He hadn't much cash, but so long as he kept working, he broke even. There was no secret about the insurance. He got the salesman around to Helen's apartment and she must have worked on the guy too. Van Tomlin told him he wanted to give her financial protection, and in view of his medical history, the premiums were pretty steep.

"A month later, while he was in her apartment, he fell out of a window."

I came back with the coffee and sat down.

"How did he fall out?" I asked in a voice I scarcely recognized as mine.

"He was waiting for her while she took a bath," Solly said. "At the inquest she said she heard him cry out. She ran into the sitting-room, naked and dripping wet, in time to see him clawing at his throat before the open window. He overbalanced and fell out before she could reach him."

I drew in a long, deep breath. This was even worse than I had imagined.

"What did the coroner think?"

Solly finished his coffee and pushed back his chair.

"It wasn't what he thought that mattered. She had only to flash her legs at him and he was happy to take every word she said as gospel. What did matter was what the insurance company thought. Stevens got this first hand from the insurance salesman, a guy named Ed Billings, who had signed Van Tomlin up. Billings told Stevens that both he and his company thought something was wrong. Van Tomlin had only just paid the first premium before he fell out of the window. Billings went around to see Helen with the idea of scaring her out of making her claim. He didn't pull his punches. He warned her if she went ahead with the claim, they would fight her. He told her if the company raised doubt at the coroner's inquest the chances were she would find herself on a murder rap. He thought he was going to put the fear of God into her, but he didn't. She accused the company of trying to side-step their responsibilities and threatened to bring that out at the inquest. It so happened the company wasn't too solid financially. Adverse publicity wouldn't have done them any good.

"It was the case of who held the strongest hand. On Helen's side the police were satisfied that Van Tomlin had died accidentally. The doctor was prepared to state on oath that Van Tomlin's heart was on the blink. Against that, the insurance company could point out that Van Tomlin had only paid one premium and Helen had the opportunity of pushing him out of the window. Billings underlined the fact that if the insurance company refused to settle the claim, the police would investigate further, and they might turn up something. In the end, they compromised. Helen accepted seven thousand instead of twenty, and the insurance company agreed to tell the coroner they were settling the claim, and once an insurance company shows willingness to settle a claim a coroner stops asking awkward questions. At the inquest the doctor said he was satisfied Van Tomlin had over-balanced during a heart attack and had fallen out of the window. The insurance company said they were going to settle the claim. Helen made eyes at the coroner, and everything went off nice and friendly.

"She stayed on in the apartment for three or four months, then when her money began to run out, she looked around for

another rich man. She met Dester. He was crazy enough to marry her, and you know the rest."

I lit a cigarette while my mind raced.

Helen must have been nuts to have attempted to pull yet another stunt on the same lines. The National Fidelity Company of California was the biggest and most powerful insurance company on the Pacific Coast. It was a certain bet that they wouldn't be carrying all the risk on that three-quarters of a million bucks. There would be other companies involved. It was one thing to threaten a small company the way she had done, but something else beside to tackle the National Fidelity.

I felt suddenly sick.

"What's biting you?" Solly said, staring at me.

"Nothing. I was thinking." I got to my feet. "Well, thanks for the information, Jack. It could be useful. I'll let you have a hundred bucks when I'm passing. The rest of it will come if I can use the information."

"Don't tell me," he said hurriedly. "I don't want to know. Just let me have the money when you can."

## CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER Solly had gone, I went down to clean the car, and while I worked I thought over what he had told me.

If she was kidding herself that she could handle the National Fidelity as she had the other company she was in for a surprise. The National Fidelity would put her on the ball of its thumb and make a smear of her on a wall.

It seemed to me now that I should have to be content with the two thousand six hundred dollars that Dester had given me and write the insurance money off as an impossible risk.

My mind was still working on the problem when I took the car over to the house.

Dester came down the steps. He paused to light a cigarette before getting into the car.

"Well, this is it, kid," he said. "There'll be no rain check for to-day. This is my last trip."

I didn't say anything: there wasn't anything to say.

He got into the car.

"Let's have the top down. We'll go in there with the flag flying. I may as well show them I don't give a damn."

I put the hood down.

As I drove along the crowded streets towards the Studios, people stared at Dester. The blue-and-cream Rolls was a familiar landmark, and they knew who was in it. They knew too that this was his last day at the Studios. The gossip columns had been full of it this morning. I could see him in the driving mirror as he sat behind me and I handed it to him. He stared back at the staring eyes.

Maybe the guard sensed that this was an important occasion. Anyway, he had the gates open for us as we came up and when he saw Dester, sitting exposed to view, he saluted.

"Front entrance to-day," Dester said, "and pick me up there to-night."

I took him around to the front entrance and pulled up.

"When you come back for me, bring a couple of suitcases with you," he said as he got out. "There'll be some liquor to shift."

"Yes, sir."

I watched him walk up the steps as if he owned the place and

I admired his guts. The doorman hesitated, then opened the door for him, hesitated again, then touched his cap.

I turned the car and drove back to the house.

As I put the Rolls into the garage I saw the Cadillac was there, and that meant Helen was somewhere in the house. I suddenly decided it was time to have a talk with her.

I went up to the apartment above the garage and changed into my new suit. I didn't intend to talk to her as a chauffeur: this morning's conference was going to be on level terms.

I went over to the house.

I stood in the hall and listened, but I couldn't hear a sound that told me where she was. I walked into the lounge. The cigarette-butts in the ash-trays and the used whisky glass on the bar told me she hadn't been in there as yet. The time was twenty minutes to eleven. It was possible she was still upstairs. I left the lounge and walked up the stairs, taking care to make no noise. I paused outside her bedroom door and listened, then, hearing no sound, I turned the door handle gently and pushed open the door.

The bedclothes had been thrown back. On a chair by her dressing-table were her nylon underwear, her silk stockings and her girdle. The bathroom door was ajar. I could hear the shower going. I stepped into the bedroom, shut the door and walked over to one of the lounging chairs and sat down. I lit a cigarette, thinking that, two years ago, a guy with a weak heart had also sat in her bedroom waiting for her while she stood under a shower. She would find it a little harder to throw me out of a window if the idea entered her lovely head.

After five or six minutes of waiting, I heard the shower turn off. I could hear her moving about in the bathroom. Another five minutes dragged by, then she came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a yellow turkish towelling wrap.

We looked at each other.

She stood motionless, her hand on the door handle, her other hand holding the wrap in place. Her face, without make-up, was pale, but still beautiful. Her eyes were as hard and as cold as two pellets of ice.

"Hello," I said and smiled at her.

"What are you doing in here?"

"I wanted to talk to you. It's time we had a talk."

"Get out!"

"I bet you didn't say that to Van Tomlin when you came out of the bathroom."

Her face remained expressionless, but her mouth tightened and ıat told me I had sunk one in that had shaken her.

She moved into the room, went over to the dressing-table and at down. "You heard what I said – get out!" She picked up a omb and began to comb her hair, her back half turned to me.

"Not before I talk to you. We have a lot to talk about: your husband, the other night, your future plans, things like that."

"If you don't get out I'll telephone for the police."

"That's fine. Go ahead and telephone them. They'll be interested to hear how you tried to murder Dester the night before last. They get a big bang out of things like that."

She laid down the comb, turned slowly and faced me. Her face now was chalk white. There was something half hidden behind the white flesh and the bone structure that sent a prickle up my spine.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me," I said. "That was a stupid move of yours. You should be grateful to me for stopping it. You should be very grateful."

"Are you drunk? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You don't imagine I would have topped it if I had been sure it was foolproof, do you? But it wasn't foolproof."

She continued to stare at me.

"You must be drunk," she said. "Get out of here!"

"I know Dester has insured his life for three-quarters of a million dollars, and you want to get your hands on the money," I said. "You want that money so badly, you tried to kill him the night before last."

That jolted her. She stiffened, and her face turned the colour of bleached bones. "That's a lie!" she said in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"You know it's the truth," I said, watching her. "The night before last you decided to get rid of him, but I was in the way as all the other servants you have had have been in the way. Don't think you've kidded me. I know how you have got rid of them so you could be alone with Dester. You thought you would have one more attempt to fix him, but you had to be sure I was out of the way. You left me stranded at the Foot-hills Club as you thought, and came back here and found, as you thought, Dester drunk and incapable. You were going to launch him in the car into the traffic and hope for the best. Only I wasn't stranded

and Dester wasn't drunk and, besides, the idea wasn't water-tight."

She looked away, reached for her comb again and began to run it through her silky, copper-coloured hair.

"I knew you were going to be a nuisance," she said as if speaking to herself. "I knew it the moment I saw you. Well, what are you going to do about it? Tell the police?"

"No, I'm not going to tell them. I am on your side," I said. "If I wasn't I should have let you drive him down to the gates. I didn't know he was faking. If he had been drunk and had hit something, you would be in jail by now."

"Would I?" She looked at herself in the mirror, then put down the comb, opened a silver cigarette-box that stood on the dressing-table and took out a cigarette. "Why?"

"Because there was no guarantee that he would have been killed. He might have been hurt; he might have come out of it without a scratch. Suppose he had told the police you had put him in the car? Even if they didn't slap an attempted murder rap on you, they would have tipped the insurance company and that would have been that."

"I still don't know what you're talking about," she said, blowing smoke at the reflection of herself in the mirror.

"You don't fool me," I said, stubbing out my cigarette and lighting another, "but okay, if you want it in one syllable words here it is: when Dester dies he will be worth three-quarters of a million. You are his wife. Unless he has willed the money elsewhere, it will come to you. You don't want to wait until he dies naturally. For all you know he might outlive you. You have decided to help him into his grave. That's okay if you can do it, but you don't seem to realize how tricky it is. You have only to make one slip and you'll kiss that money good-bye for keeps. You're dealing with the biggest and the most powerful insurance company in the country. You have already made one slip. You've shown your husband your hand."

"How have I done that?" she asked.

"He wasn't drunk. As soon as you left the garage he came to. He told me he wanted to make sure you would murder him for the insurance money and now he is sure. He said he is going to take care you don't ever get the money."

She lifted her eyebrows. "Did he say that?"

"Yes."

She thought for a moment, then she shrugged her shoul[illegible] "Well, that seems to be that then, doesn't it?" She [illegible]

at me. "It is very touching that you should tell me this. Why don't you go to the police and tell them instead of me?"

"Don't be dumb," I said. "I told you I'm on your side."

"Why are you on my side?"

I grinned at her. "Take a look in the mirror: that should tell you. Besides, I was planning to take half of what you got from the insurance company."

She studied me, her face expressionless.

"What makes you think you would have got it?"

"You're not stupid. You would have figured it was better to have half a bun, than no bun at all. If you hadn't shared with me, I would have blown the lid off your racket."

"You couldn't have proved anything," she said.

"No, but I could have created doubt. I've been digging into your past. After seeing the way you handled Dester when he was pretending to be drunk, I can see how easy it was for you to tip Van Tomlin out of the window."

"He fell out. I didn't touch him." There was a wary look in her eyes that told me I had jolted her again.

"That's your story," I said. "If I went along to the National Fidelity and told them what I had seen in the garage on Wednesday night and jogged their memory about Van Tomlin, you wouldn't have a hope in hell of ever collecting Dester's insurance. They would stick their best dicks on to you. They would investigate Van Tomlin's death. They would make you sue them for Dester's insurance, and they would cast so many doubts, paint such a picture of your character that no judge would find for you. They might even hang a murder rap on you. I've had some experience with big insurance companies, and you'd be surprised at the antics they get up to so they don't have to settle a claim."

She continued to stare at me. "So you imagine you're in a nice, safe position to blackmail me?"

I laughed.

"I was in a nice, safe position to blackmail you, but you've handled it so badly there won't be any insurance money now for you: nor for me. Dester's on to you, and he's going to make sure you don't get the money. You've got to face it."

"Have you finished?" she asked, stubbing out her cigarette.

"Yes, I've finished. I just wanted you to know where you stood. Don't make plans to knock Dester off. Your only chance is to wait now until he dies of drink. Maybe he'll have a change of heart and leave you the money in his will, providing you are

nice to him. Why not try it? It can't hurt you. Play ball with him. Win him over. He can't last much longer at the rate he's swallowing the stuff."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it. Now, get out!" She stood up, facing me.

"He said you were as cold as an iceberg," I said, getting up. "I don't believe it. I'm tempted to find out just how cold you are."

She didn't move, but the colour of her eyes darkened.

"We're alone here," I went on, moving towards her. "Do you see any reason why we shouldn't use this opportunity?" I got within a foot of her, then reached out, putting my hands on her shoulders. Her hand flashed up towards my face, but I was expecting such a move. I caught her wrist, jerked her to me, twisted her arm behind her and crushed my mouth down on hers. For a long moment she remained rigid, not fighting me off, but her lips hard and unyielding, then she suddenly relaxed against me, her arms slid up and around my neck.

Around twenty minutes past one, I went into her bathroom and took a shower. I was feeling pretty good. My forecast had been accurate. She was no iceberg, and I wished now I had had a bet with Solly when I told him I could thaw her out.

I dressed in the bathroom and returned to the bedroom. She was lying on the bed, covered by the yellow wrap, her hair spread out on the pillow, her eyes closed, her breathing gentle and steady. Her face was flushed. She looked younger and more lovely than I had ever seen her before. I stood at the foot of the bed and looked down at her. Like a relaxed cat, she stretched, opened her eyes and stared up at me.

"So you really think I've got no hope of getting that money?" she said.

"Is that all you can think about?" I said, suddenly irritated that the first words she could speak to me had to be about the money. Up to this moment, she had not spoken a word since I had taken her in my arms.

"Why not? It's important, isn't it? Three-quarters of a million! Think what we could do with all that money."

Well, at least, she was now including me in the financial scene. I sat on the bed, close to her.

"He said he was going to make sure you didn't get it," I said. "Yesterday he flew up to San Francisco. It's my bet he's

talked with the insurance people. No, I think you can kiss it good-bye."

"His contract runs out to-day," she said, reaching for a cigarette. She put it between her red lips and waited for me to light it. She went on, "He'll stay here night and day, drinking. He'll have no more credit. They'll take everything. I might as well pack and get out now."

"And where do you think you'll go?"

She shrugged. "I've a little money put by. I'll find someone else. There's always some fool with money to be found. I think I'll go to Miami."

"Don't be in too much of a rush," I said, lighting a cigarette. "Stick with him until the smash. You never know. He might borrow on the policy and square his debts. Three-quarters of a million is quite a piece of money."

"He won't give me any of it. No, I'm going to clear out. I've wasted too much time already. I can look after myself."

"I'm not so sure that you can," I said, looking at her. "You may be smart at hooking a guy, but you're not all that hot when it comes to landing him. You lost thirteen thousand on the Van Tomlin deal. You've made a complete mess of the Dester deal. Tell me, did you push Van Tomlin out of the window?"

She stared up at me, her green eyes suddenly empty.

"No. He fell out. I could have saved him perhaps if I had caught hold of him, but I didn't. But I didn't push him out."

I had an idea she was lying, but I knew it was a waste of time to press her. She had no intention of telling me what really happened.

"Well, don't be in too much of a rush. Don't go to-day. Wait and see what he's planning to do when he gets back," I said. "You never know. Why don't you have a change of heart? When he comes back, be kind to him. He might part with something. It's worth trying."

She grimaced. "It's too late now," she said. "I couldn't bear him to touch me. No, I'm going to clear out."

"Wait until he comes back," I said.

She shrugged. "All right, but I shall go to-morrow."

"Alone?"

She looked at me. "Of course. You don't imagine I'd want you with me, do you?"

"You might do worse," I said. "You and I might work a de-luxe badger game. I'm not saying we could pick up three-quarters of a million: that's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,

but we could pick up quite a lot of spare change. You need a guy like me to handle the financial side of the business. With your looks and my brains we could make a packet of money."

She smiled. "Have you any brains?"

"You'd be surprised. Look, suppose we both go to Miami. Your job would be to look beautiful and handle the suckers. My job would be to step in at the right moment and milk them. You can't do that. You may think you can, but it doesn't work. You need a guy to do it."

Her expression was thoughtful while she stared out of the window. "I'll think about it," she said.

I stood up. "Well, don't leave to-day. I'll talk to you again to-morrow. I'm going to get some lunch. Want to come with me?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

I stared down at her. She was once more remote and cold; the ice had come back. I didn't care. Just so long as I could thaw her out when I felt like it, why should I worry how she was in the intervals?

"I'm picking him up around four. We'll be back before six."

"Yes." She was looking beyond me. I wondered what her mind was working at. I bent over her and made to kiss her, but she turned her head with a little grimace. "Leave me alone," she said sharply. "Go away."

"The thing I like about you is your endearing nature," I said, straightening. "Well, okay, please yourself. It's no skin off my nose."

"Do go away," she said impatiently. "You don't have to be a bore, do you?"

I wanted then to slap her face. It suddenly dawned on me I had made as much impression on her as a rubber hammer makes on a rock.

I went out of the room and slammed the door behind me.

At four o'clock sharp, I rapped on Dester's office door, turned the handle and walked in.

He was writing at his desk. He looked up and nodded to me. For the first time I had been in this room, he was sober.

"Get the bottles packed, kid," he said, waving to the cup-board. "I won't be a minute."

I had brought with me two suit-cases. By the time I ha[illegible] packed the bottles, he had finished his letter. He took out a[illegible] envelope, slid the letter into it and sealed it. He put th[illegible] his wallet.

"I guess that's about everything," he said, getting to his feet. "Okay, let's get out of here."

As he was moving to the door, there was a knock and the door opened.

A girl stood in the doorway: she was tall and thin and as flat as a board. Her hair was scraped back and she wore horn-rimmed spectacles. She was the kind of girl who would never marry and who would finish up in a back bed-sitting-room with a couple of cats for company.

She had a bunch of long-stemmed red roses, done up in a tissue-paper sheaf that she held awkwardly and which she offered to Dester.

"I – I just wanted to say I'm sorry you are going, Mr. Dester," she said. "There are a lot of us who will miss you. I and they wish you luck."

Dester stared at her: under his raw, red skin, I could see he had turned white, giving him a horrible, mottled look. He took the roses and held them against his chest. He started to say something, but the words wouldn't come. For a long moment the girl and he stood looking at each other, then she put her hands to her eyes and began to cry.

He walked around her, still holding the roses and made for the door. There was a look on his face I'll never forget. I went after him. We walked down the passage, through the reception hall, where everyone stared, and down the steps to the car.

He got into the car and laid the roses on the seat beside him.

"Get me home," he said hoarsely, "but first put up this damned hood."

I pulled up the hood.

By the time I reached the house, he seemed to have recovered, although his face was still blotchy. He got out of the car, carrying the roses and he gave me a stiff, tight smile.

"It's a funny thing, but the most unlikely people remember one. That girl – she had some small job at the Studio. I can't even remember her name." He looked at the roses. "Nice of her." He stood staring at the flowers for a long moment, then with an effort, he snapped out of his depression. "Get the liquor up to my bedroom. I want you to come over to the house at eight o'clock to-night. I have a job for you – probably your last job, kid."

Wondering what it was all about, I said I'd be there.

He turned away, then stopped, his hand going to his breast pocket.

"Oh, damn it! I meant you to stop so I could mail this letter." He took the letter from his wallet. "Be a good kid and mail it now for me, will you? Take the car. It's important."

"Yes, sir," I said, taking the letter. I slid it into my pocket. Then I picked up the suit-cases and hauled them upstairs while I wondered what he wanted to see me about at eight o'clock this evening.

There were thirty bottles of Scotch in the cases. I put them in three neat rows on the top shelf of his wardrobe. Then I went downstairs, and completely forgetting about the letter he had asked me to mail, I put the Rolls away. It was only when I was changing that I found it. I looked at it curiously. It was addressed to: *Mr. Edwin Burnett, Holt & Burnett, Attorneys-at-Law, 28th Street, Los Angeles.* The nearest post box was a quarter of a mile down the road, and I thought the hell with it. I planned to go out after I had been over to the house and I would post it then.

At five minutes to eight I went over to the house. The clock in the hall was striking the hour when I rapped on Dester's study door.

"Come in," he called.

I opened the door and went in.

He was sitting behind his big desk, a bottle of Scotch and a glass half full of whisky in front of him. The ashtray was crammed with cigarette-butts. He had been drinking. I could tell that by the sweat beads on his face and the curious glitter in his eyes.

"Come in and sit down," he said. "Take that chair over there."

I wondered what it was all about. I went to the chair and sat down.

He nodded to a box of cigarettes on the desk.

"Help yourself. Do you want a drink?"

"No, thank you," I said and reached for a cigarette.

"Did you post that letter?"

"Yes, sir," I said, without batting an eyelid.

"Thank you." He took a long drink, then splashed more whisky into his glass before saying, "The reason why I've asked you here, kid, is because I want you to be a witness to a conversation I'm going to have with my wife. You might have to give evidence about this conversation before a court of law, so keep

your wits about you and try to remember what is said."

That jolted me. I stared at him.

"Just sit quiet and say nothing," he went on, getting to his feet. He crossed to the door, lurching slightly, opened it and, raising his voice, he called, "Helen! Will you come down, please?"

Then he returned to his chair and sat down.

There was a long, heavy silence, then I heard Helen coming down the stairs. A moment later, she entered. She looked at Dester, then at me and she paused.

"What is it?" she asked sharply.

"Come in and sit down," Dester said, getting to his feet. "I want to talk to you."

"What's he doing here?" she demanded, not moving.

"Please, Helen, come in and sit down. I have asked him to be here as an independent witness to what I have to say to you."

She shrugged, moved to a chair near the desk and sat down. He pushed the cigarette-box towards her.

"Please smoke if you want to," he said.

"I don't want to," she snapped. "What is this?"

He sat down, studied her for a long moment, then lit a cigarette himself. She looked contemptuously at him, then looked pointedly away.

He turned to me.

"I'm sorry if I'm going to embarrass you, kid," he said, "but there are a few details you must hear before you will be able to follow what comes after." He spoke rapidly, and I could see he was making an effort to keep his voice steady. "I married my wife a year ago. When I first met her I thought she was the most wonderful woman in the world. I was crazy about her. I was even worried that something might happen to me and she'd be left without funds. I was so besotted that I insured my life for three-quarters of a million dollars and willed it to her. I told her what I had done because I wanted her to know she would be secure if anything happened to me. I can see her now when I told her. When it sank in that I was worth more to her dead than alive, she couldn't hide her real feelings for me. She turned frigid. I'm not going to elaborate on that. It sickened her to such an extent to know that I was between her and all that money that she couldn't bear me to touch her. You have only to look at her, put yourself in my place and think what it means to have a woman like her turn frigid on you, and you can guess how I felt. I was fool enough to start hitting the bottle, and once I

started, I couldn't stop. I began to slip badly in my work. I couldn't concentrate. I spent money recklessly when I was drunk. Because of her, I've ruined myself."

"You poor fool," Helen broke in. "Do you imagine he's interested in all this drivel? For heaven's sake, come to the point, if there is a point."

"Yes, I'll come to the point," he said, "but you won't like it when I do. Never mind, you have had your run and now you must expect to take what's coming to you." He looked over at me. "She wanted the money so badly that she decided to get rid of me. It won't be necessary to go into details, but I have satisfied myself that she is prepared to murder me for the money. She has already made three futile attempts: one of them you witnessed on Wednesday night. She thought I was drunk enough to take out the Buick and she hoped I would get involved in a smash. She isn't a clever murderess, and her attempts haven't succeeded."

"You're drunk," she said contemptuously. "You don't know what you're saying."

"I may be drunk, but I do know what I'm saying." He took a drink from his glass and went on, "But we won't argue about it. Nash saw what happened on Wednesday night: he is intelligent enough to judge for himself." He turned away from me and addressed himself to Helen. "Your attempts to get rid of me have been strangely uninspired. Didn't it ever occur to you that the safest and simplest way was to wait until I was asleep, then shoot me through the head, and leave the gun by my side? Will it surprise you to hear half the movie people here expect me to shoot myself? I have the motive to finish my life. I am a drunk. I'm unhappily married. I have no money and a lot of debts. It would come as no surprise if I did shoot myself. Why didn't you think of doing that?"

She stared at him. "I wanted the money," she said. "If they thought you had shot yourself, they wouldn't pay out."

"My dear girl, how stupid you are. You had the chance to read the policy. I gave it to you if you remember. If the assured dies by his own hand after the policy has been in force for a year, the company does pay out."

The look of hatred she gave him sent a creepy sensation up my spine.

"But don't imagine you can get away with that now," he went on, leaning back in his chair. "I have fixed it that in the event of my killing myself there will be no pay-out. Yesterday, I

flew up to San Francisco and met the man in charge of the claims department of the National Fidelity: a man named Maddux. I must say he impressed me. He has a big reputation in the insurance world. He is smart, tough and extremely efficient. It is said of him that he knows instinctively when a claim is a fake or not. He has been with the National Fidelity for fifteen years, and during that time he has sent a large number of people to jail, and eighteen people to the death cell."

He paused while he took a drink, then he topped up the glass with more whisky.

"I went to see this man with the intention of cancelling the policy. But on the way up I had an idea. I am probably being vindictive, but after all you ruined my life and the setup that came to me is the kind that would make a good movie – you mustn't forget I've been a good movie maker in my time. Since you have tried to murder me and you have never showed me any kindness, it occurred to me that you should be punished."

She stiffened, her hands closing into fists.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, watching her. "Even if I wanted to, I couldn't take police action against you. I have no proof. And I don't want to punish you myself. I've thought of a way to give you the opportunity to punish yourself."

"I'm not going to listen to much more of this nonsense," she said angrily.

"You should listen because you still have a chance of getting your pretty claws on all that money: not much of a chance, but still a chance."

It was now my turn to stiffen to attention.

"Let me tell you about my interview with Maddux," Dester went on. "When I got this idea about you punishing yourself, I realized I couldn't tell him the truth. I was anxious to get the suicide clause altered because that would make things too easy for you if I didn't. So I told him I was an alcoholic with suicidal tendencies, and as I was most anxious that you should come in for the insurance money and that I was also anxious in my sober moments not to kill myself, I thought it would act as a curb if the clause covering payment on suicide was cancelled. I don't think he believed this explanation, but he was quick enough to cancel the clause." He paused to take another drink, and I noticed his hand was very unsteady. "So the position is now that if I kill myself or if you murder me and make it look like suicide the company won't pay out. Do you understand that?"

She didn't say anything. She was staring at the opposite wall, her brows creased in a frown: but she was listening.

"Some weeks ago," he went on, "I decided that when my contract ran out I would shoot myself."

She reacted to this as I did. She looked quickly at him.

"I realized once my contract ran out, I would have no future," he went on calmly. "I should be without funds and heavily in debt. I shrank from the idea of bankruptcy. Well, my contract has run out, there is no money and I am still very much in debt, so sometime to-night I am going to end my life."

"I don't believe you," Helen said, her voice harsh. "Anyway, do you think I care what you do?"

"No, I don't think you do," he returned. "That is not the point. Very soon now I shall shoot myself in this room. It is unlikely that anyone except you and Nash will hear the shot. Now listen to this very carefully: you will have a few hours – not more – to turn this suicide into murder. You won't be able to turn it into an accident: people don't accidentally shoot themselves through the head."

She was staring at him now as if she had thought he had gone crazy.

"If the police say I have killed myself, the insurance company won't pay out. But if the police say I have been murdered, then the insurance company will have to pay out. Are you following all this? Can you see the trap I am setting for you? Now do you see what I mean when I told you I am giving you the opportunity of punishing yourself? The bait in the trap is worth three-quarters of a million. You have only to fake clues, tell enough lies to turn my suicide into a murder, and then – if you have been very clever and you haven't made any mistakes – you will get the money."

Something cold dropped on to my hand. I found I was sweating. Looking across at Helen, I saw her face was white and she was as rigid as a statue.

"I don't know what happens when one dies," Dester went on, "but odd things can happen. It may be I shall be able to watch you after I am dead. I hope so for it will be amusing." He lit another cigarette while he stared at Helen. "I have an idea you won't be able to resist the bait. You will try to turn my suicide into murder. I don't think you are clever enough to pull it off, not against a man of Maddux's brains. It is only fair to warn you that he is exceptional. You could so easily make a mistake and you might then find yourself charged with my murder,

which would be rather funny considering you have already tried to murder me, wouldn't it? I have made it still more complicated for you by asking Nash here to listen to all this. But he may not be impossibly difficult. You have a way with men, and it is possible you may persuade him to keep his mouth shut or even help you. After all, three-quarters of a million is a very large sum, and in return for a share in the money, he might be persuaded to help you."

Helen jumped to her feet.

"I'm not listening to any more of this!" she exclaimed. "You drunken fool! You wouldn't have the nerve to kill yourself. Keep your rotten money! I don't want it! There are plenty of other fish in the sea besides you! Go to hell and stay there!"

She flung back the door and stormed out into the hall. I watched her run up the stairs, and a moment later, a door slammed violently.

I got up. I was sweating and shaking.

"And I guess I don't want to hear any more either," I said, and without looking at him I walked into the hall, jerked open the front door and walked down the steps.

I was half-way to the garage when I heard the sound of a shot. The bang rattled the windows of the house and stopped me as if I had walked into a wall.

For a long moment I stood motionless, then turning, I ran back to the house and up the steps and into the hall.

At the head of the stairs, white-faced, her eyes wide, was Helen.

I looked up at her.

"Go and see," she said in a hoarse whisper.

I braced myself, then crossed the hall and opened the study door.

## CHAPTER SIX

DESTER had fallen forward across the desk. Blood from his smashed skull made a growing pool on the blotter that was absorbing most of it. The .38 automatic I had seen him with lay on the floor near his feet.

I didn't have to touch him to know he was dead. With such a terrible head injury he had to be dead.

I stood staring at him, my mind vacant with horror. I couldn't believe he had done this thing, then jerking my eyes away, I walked to the door and out into the hall.

Helen had come down the stairs. She stood motionless, staring at me.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"Yes." My own voice was as shaky as hers.

"The mad, drunken fool! I thought he hadn't the nerve to do it."

She went past me and into his study.

I felt a trickle of cold sweat run down the side of my face, and I put my hand in my pocket for my handkerchief. My fingers touched the envelope containing the letter he had asked me to post. I pulled it out, stared at it for a long moment, then I slit the envelope and pulled out a sheet of paper. I read the letter, my mind only half aware of its meaning. Then I read it again:

From Erle Dester June 19th
256 Hill Crest Avenue
Hollywood.

MY DEAR BURNETT,

Because of your years of experience as an attorney, I don't suppose what I am about to write to you will shock you over much. I've come to the end of things, and to-night I intend to shoot myself. You know enough about my affairs to realize as I do that there is now no future for me.

You know too how badly Helen has treated me. I have no intentions of letting her profit by my death. I have seen Maddux of the National Fidelity Insurance Company and have arranged with him to cancel the clause in the policy covering self-destruction. The new clause covering this is attached to

the policy which you will find in the right-hand top drawer of my desk.

So the position is that since I am shooting myself the policy will be cancelled. However, Helen is desperate for money, and three-quarters of a million is a tempting sum. It is possible she may be desperate enough to attempt to defraud the insurance company. She could do so by making my suicide appear to be murder. This sounds far-fetched to you, doesn't it? But I know Helen a lot better than you do. I have a young fellow working for me: his name is Glyn Nash, and it is possible Helen may fake my suicide to look as if I had been murdered by him or some unknown person. If she does do this, I am most anxious that you should not interfere. I have no doubt that Maddux will find her out, but if she succeeds or if she makes a mistake that will endanger her life, you will then, of course, take action and show this letter to the police.

I feel a short term in prison for attempted fraud would do her a lot of good. You think I am being vindictive? Perhaps I am, but I feel justified.

To satisfy your legal mind I am asking Miss Lennox to witness my signature. I repeat again that I am killing myself, and no matter what Helen says, this is not a case of murder but of suicide.

Miss Lennox has, of course, no knowledge of the contents of this letter.

So long.

ERLE DESTER.

*Witness:* MAY LENNOX,
*Secretary,*
1145c Marlin Avenue,
Hollywood.

"What are you doing?" Helen asked sharply.

I turned and looked at her. White-faced, she stood in the doorway, watching me.

I folded the letter and put it in my pocket.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

I scarcely heard her. I was remembering his words: *You have only to fake clues, tell enough lies to turn my suicide into murder, and then – if you have been very clever and you haven't made any mistakes – you will get the money.*

Three-quarters of a million!

I realized that his letter gave me protection if I could only

think of a way to turn his suicide into murder. If I made a mistake, if I was found out, I had only to produce this letter to keep out of trouble.

"Glyn!"

It was the first time she had ever called me by my first name.

"Wait," I said. "Don't do anything. Let me think."

"We must get a doctor and call the police," she said. "I'll use the phone upstairs."

"Wait!" I said again.

There was a note in my voice that stopped her dead. She stared at me.

"Don't call them yet. Don't do anything. Go upstairs and wait for me."

"But we must tell them . . ."

I went up to her and taking her by the arms I gave her a vicious little shake.

"Do what I tell you! Wait for me upstairs!"

She must have seen by my face that this was no time to argue.

I went into Dester's study and stood looking at him. If only I could put the clock back. If only I had time to think out a perfect murder plan. If only I had known the fool was going to kill himself so I could have set the stage.

Three-quarters of a million!

It was worth any risk except a murder rap and I didn't have to bother about that. His letter would keep me in the clear if I slipped up and the police thought I had killed him.

If he would only stay just as he was until I had time to work out a foolproof plan. In a little while rigor mortis would set in. A police surgeon would know to within an hour when he died. The police would then find out that both Helen and I were in the house when he died. If I hid the gun to make it look like murder, they would think we had either faked the murder or had actually murdered him: either way we wouldn't get the money. We needed to have perfect alibis. We needed to prove we were miles away when he died.

Time was everything, and that was the one thing I hadn't got.

I stood there, watching him bleed, while I racked my brains for an idea.

The house was silent. The only sounds that came to me were the faint ticking of the desk clock and the steady thumping of my heart. Then above these sounds, but so faint that if I hadn't been standing still I shouldn't have heard it, came the gentle rumble of the deep-freeze cabinet motor starting up.

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That sound nudged my brain alive. I saw then how I could turn the clock back. I hadn't worked as a refrigerator salesman for two years without learning what a refrigeration plant can do. Before I was turned loose on to the road I had taken a six-weeks' course on the principles of refrigeration. Among the things I had learned was the use of a refrigerating plant in morgues and its effects on a dead body.

I saw at once that I now had the means to make Dester stay just as he was until I had time to work out a fool-proof plan.

Given any luck, I knew I was now only one jump away from getting my hands on those seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

A little over an hour later, I went upstairs to Helen's room.

She had drawn the curtains. The bedside lamp was on, casting shadows. She lay on the bed, in an oyster-coloured silk wrap, her face fine drawn and pale, a cigarette burning between her fingers.

I leaned against the door and looked at her and she looked at me without moving.

"Why have you been all this time?" she asked. "Have you called the police?"

I walked across to one of the lounging chairs, set a bottle of whisky, two glasses and a bottle of Whiterock on the table and sat down.

"No. I haven't called them."

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked sharply anc half sat up. "You must call them."

I made two big drinks, carried one over to her and put it o the bedside table, then I went back to the chair, sat down agai and took a long pull at my glass.

"Glyn! Why haven't you called the police?" she said, he voice shrill.

"You heard what he said," I returned. "He said if we we very clever and made no mistakes we could get the money. Yc want the money, don't you?"

She swung her legs off the bed and sat up. Her green eyes we glittering like emeralds.

"What do you mean? He's set a trap for us. You don't thi I'm going to be such a fool as to try to get the money now know there is a trap, do you?"

"Listen: we can get that money. The National Fidelity v have to pay up if we can prove to them he was murdered."

"That is exactly what he wanted us to do," she said. "We're not going to do it. We can't prove he was murdered unless we involve ourselves. What do you imagine I have been doing up here all this time? I've thought about it. If we hide the gun and say he was murdered, they'll pick on us. If we had time to think of something, time to arrange an alibi, we might do it, but we haven't time. He's dead. They'll know when he died. We've got to call the police at once!"

"But we have got the time," I said.

She stared at me.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. We have got the time. We have all the time in the world."

"We haven't! He won't remain like he is for long. You must know that. A doctor can tell when he died . . ."

"I have put him in the deep-freeze cabinet," I said.

"What?"

She started to her feet.

"I have put him in the deep-freeze cabinet."

"You must be mad!"

"Shut up and listen," I said quietly. "I'm not mad. I know what I'm doing. What you don't know is I'm something of an expert in refrigeration. I used to sell deep-freeze cabinets. Before I was turned loose on the suckers, I took an intensive course on the subject so I would know all the answers when the suckers tried to act smart. The reason why Dester was so sure he had laid a foolproof trap for us was because he was certain we would have no time to fake alibis nor to think up a smart plan. He was relying on the fact that a doctor can tell within an hour or two when a man dies. Dester died at eight-forty, and no doubt the police could prove that we were both in the house at that time. That was what Dester was relying on. By putting him in the deep-freeze, I've beaten him. At that temperature the normal process of deterioration is arrested. Bleeding will stop; rigor mortis won't set in. We can keep him in the cabinet for six weeks or six months, and it is only when we take him out that deterioration begins. Are you following all this?" I leaned forward and stared at her. "When we take him out and after some hours, he will begin to bleed again, and later rigor mortis will set in. Look, let me put it even plainer: suppose we keep him in the cabinet until next Saturday week, then we take him out and dump his body somewhere. Suppose the police find him the following day. The police surgeon would be ready to swear that

he died on Saturday when in reality he died fifteen days before. Don't you see how simple it has made it for us?"

She sat still, her fists clenched. I thought I could hear the faint thudding of her heartbeats, but the sound might have been my own heart hammering against my side.

"No!" she exclaimed suddenly. "I won't have anything to do with it. It's too dangerous. They'll find out."

"What's the matter with you? You didn't worry about throwing Van Tomlin out of the window, did you?"

"I didn't throw him out!"

"That's your story. You're in a much safer position now."

"No. They'll think I killed him. I'm sure they will."

"Don't be such a fool. This is our chance to get the money. Do you think I'd touch it for one moment if I thought we could go wrong? I know what I'm talking about. If we can't think of a foolproof idea, then we don't go ahead. All we will have to do is to take him out of the freezer, dump him somewhere with the gun in his hand and inform the insurance company he has killed himself. They won't want it proved otherwise. They'll be working on our side if we can't get a bright idea, and when those boys are working for you, you're safe."

She picked up the glass of whisky and took a long drink. Her hand was shaking.

"It's that man Maddux who frightens me."

"So what? We're forewarned, aren't we? Okay, suppose he is all that tough and efficient? We've got the time. Time is everything in this. We've got the time to give ourselves a water-tight, foolproof alibi. We don't try it until we have gone over it again and again; rehearsed it again and again until we know it inside out. This isn't going to be a rush job. We can take six months if we want to."

"But suppose they think we did it? Suppose we do it so well, they prove it was us who murdered him?"

"I've even got the answer to that one too," I said and took Dester's letter from my pocket. "This is a letter Dester gave me to post. It's to his attorney. Luckily for us I forgot to post it. I'll read it to you."

She sat motionless, her beautiful face white and her great green eyes stony while I read the letter to her. When I had finished, she drew in a long, slow breath.

"The devil!" she said softly. "So it was a trap. He never intended me to get the money. The devil!"

"Never mind. He was smart, but not smart enough," I said,

folding the letter and putting it back in my wallet. "If something goes wrong; if we make a bad mistake – and we're not going to make a bad mistake – but if we do, and the police think we murdered him, this letter will keep us out of the death cell. That's all that worries me. For three-quarters of a million dollars I'm willing to risk a fraud rap, but not a murder rap."

She held out her hand. "I want that letter."

I shook my head.

"Sorry, but you're not having it. I'm keeping it. You're gorgeous to look at, but I don't trust you further than I can throw you. This letter is my guarantee against a double cross. If you and I are going to work this scheme, I'm not giving you the slightest chance of tossing me out of a window after you have cashed in nor am I giving you the slightest chance of hanging a murder rap around my neck. No, I'm keeping it. I'll look after it as I'd look after my life. So long as I have it you will have to toe the line, and when the time comes to split the money, I'll be sure I'll get my share.

She studied me, her face expressionless.

"I think you had better give that letter to me, Glyn," she said. Her voice was almost a caress.

"You heard what I said."

"I want it." Her voice sharpened. "I must have it!"

"I'm keeping it. You don't have to worry. I'll look after it."

She shrugged, got slowly to her feet and went over to the dressing-table. She picked up a comb and ran it through her hair.

"Now you know the setup," I said, watching her closely, "are you willing to have a shot at it?"

"I still think it is dangerous," she said and put down the comb. "I still think this man Maddux will find out what we have done."

She pulled open a drawer in her dressing-table. I was waiting for just that move. I was on my feet and had crossed to her in two strides. I grabbed hold of her arms, pinning them to her sides and swung her away from the dressing-table. I had just time to see the .25 automatic lying in the drawer before she arched her back and nearly had me over. I knew she was strong by the way she had handled Dester, but I didn't expect her to be quite as strong as she was. She broke my hold, got one arm free and her fingers, like claws, hooked towards my eyes. I caught her wrist just in time. She slammed against me, her foot hooked around the back of my leg. I tried to keep my balance, then went over

on my back on the floor with a crash that shook the house. came down on top of me, her fingers sinking into my throat. had a grip like steel. She drove her knee into my chest, ben over me, her lips drawn off her teeth. Her expression turned cold. I drove my fist into her midriff. I saw the sick look of come into her eyes and felt her grip slacken. I hit her again. couldn't take that kind of treatment. She suddenly let go of scrambled to her feet and made a blind dash back to the dressi table. I threw out an arm, my hand caught her ankle and brou her down. She squirmed around, her other foot in its bedro slipper caught me on the side of the head with enough force daze me. She kicked her imprisoned foot free, got up on ha and knees as I rolled towards her, locking my arms around waist and pulling her down. She closed with me again, her han seeking my throat, but this time, I kept my chin down. Using weight I pinned her under me, but she somehow managed to her knee against my chest and throw me off. It was my turn make a dash for the dressing-table. We arrived at the same tim I drove my shoulder against hers, sent her reeling against t wall, dipped into the drawer and snatched up the gun. I swur around, pointing it at her.

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"Give me that letter," she said in a tight, strangled voice.

"I said no and I mean no," I said. "Now get out of th way!"

"You'll be sorry . . ."

"But not half so sorry as I would be if I gave it to you." I began to move forward slowly. She gave ground, circling away from me until I reached the door. I opened it without taking my eyes off her.

"We'll have another talk to-morrow," I said. "Relax. I'm handling this business. All you have to do is to say amen."

Then I stepped out into the passage, slammed the door, turned and sprinted down the stairs, out of the house and across to the garage.

I slid into the Rolls, started the engine and drove fast down the drive.

I didn't relax until I had lodged the letter and Dester's gun in an all-night safe deposit. I put the key of the safe in an envelope, scribbled a note to my bank manager asking him to hold the key until I needed it. I dropped the envelope with the

house.

I only slept for a few hours that night. There was a lot to think about and a lot to arrange. I didn't attempt to think about how to turn Dester's suicide into a murder. There was time for that, but what I had to work out was how I was to explain away his absence to anyone who asked for him until I had worked out a plan to explain his absence, and how I was to keep the creditors from moving in now they knew he was out of a job and how I could stop them taking over the house and, of course, taking over the deep-freeze cabinet.

I wondered if I could find some out-of-the-way cabin which I could rent and to which I could move the deep-freeze cabinet, but, thinking about it, I decided the risk would be too great. Helen and I couldn't possibly handle the cabinet on our own. It was much too heavy. If it got out that we had moved the cabinet, the police or Maddux might just possibly hit on my scheme. The cabinet had to stay where it was: in sight of everyone, and I had to hope and pray it wouldn't cross anyone's mind to look inside it.

By the time the sun came up, I had got my first moves fairly well worked out. I got up just after six o'clock and walked over to the house.

I went up to Helen's bedroom, turned the handle and pushed open the door.

The early sun came through the slats of the blinds. She was lying on her back, her glistening red hair spread out on the pillow, one arm above her head. She was smoking and she looked at me as I came in, her face expressionless.

I shut the door, went over to the bed and sat beside her.

"Hello," I said. "Still hating me?"

"What have you done with the letter?" she asked, staring up at me.

"It's in a safe deposit where no one but me can get at it. Forget the letter. There's no point in us fighting. We've got ourselves a three-quarters of a million dollar partnership. What have we to fight about?"

She didn't say anything, but looked away, moving her long legs under the sheet restlessly.

"Well, you've had a few hours to think it over," I went on. "What's the verdict? Do I go after the money or don't I?"

"How will you do it?"

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"Well, you've had a few hours to think it over," I went on. "What's the verdict? Do I go after the money or don't I?"

"How will you do it?"

"I don't know – yet. I'm not even going to think about how I'm going to do it unless I'm sure you're in it with me. This I do know: we have ninety-nine chances out of a hundred of pulling it off. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it, and I wouldn't touch it if I thought for a moment we could slip up. Are you in with me or not?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm in it with you."

I leaned forward and kissed her. I expected her to duck away, but she didn't. She remained still, looking up at the ceiling, but I might have been kissing the back of my hand for all the response I got. It was the kind of kiss Dester must have got time and time again until the poor guy had taken to the bottle, but it would take more than a frigid kiss to turn me into a rum-dum.

I grinned down at her.

"And that's no skin off my nose either."

She just stared blankly at me. I remember what Dester had said about loving a dead thing.

"Okay, stay in your iceberg," I said. "There are more important things to worry about. We've got to raise some money. That's the first essential. I want *all* the jewels you've got: anything he had that will raise money."

She came alive then.

"You're not having anything of mine!"

"Don't be so dumb! We've got to have funds if we're going to swing this job. I'm putting two thousand bucks into the kitty. You've got to part with as much as you've got. I'm going right away to San Francisco to sell the Cadillac."

"That's *my* car! You're not touching it!"

I let go of her and stood up.

"Do I have to give it to you in one-syllable words? To-day is Saturday. It's possible nothing will happen to-day; certainly not to-morrow, but on Monday his creditors will have heard he has left the Studios and they will arrive by car, on foot, by bicycle and by taxi. There will be swarms of them. We've got to be ready for them. We've got to make them believe that Dester isn't short of money. We've got to pick two or three of the most troublesome of them and pay them. They'll spread the tale, and with any luck, the others will hold off. From now on I'm going to be Dester's personal secretary. He's been offered a job in commercial television: a big job. He's in New York right now negotiating a salary that will top anything anyone has ever been paid in television before. I'm handling his affairs here until he comes back."

She was sitting up, her green eyes startled.
"They won't believe you."
"Oh, yes, they will. You haven't seen me in action. I'm a salesman. I can sell snow to an Eskimo if I put my mind to it, and am I going to put my mind to it! But I must have my bluff backed with money. I'll only have to pay one or two of them and the rest will beg me to let their accounts run on. I know. These boys are suckers. I'll put it to them in such a way they'll know Dester will go elsewhere if they ask for a settlement. But I must have at least six thousand bucks to work with. I'll get twenty-five hundred with any luck for the Cadillac. I've got two thousand of my own. Now you've got to chip in."
She got out of bed.
"How do I know you won't take the money and never come back here?"
"You don't know, but if you think I'm nuts enough to pass up a half share in three-quarters of a million bucks for a handful of jewellery, you have another think coming."
I got the stuff out of her in the end. It was like drawing her teeth, but what she did finally part with was good, and I had no doubt that I could raise three thousand on it if I worked at it.
I got away by six forty-five. I had a four-hundred-mile drive ahead of me. I had to go to San Francisco to sell the car. If I tried to sell it in Los Angeles the word would have got around that Dester was selling up, and then we would be in trouble.
The Cadillac could move and I kept it moving. For the first two hours I had the road more or less to myself, and I touched ninety-five in places. But later the roads got more congested and I lost time. I finally reached the city late in the afternoon. I had to go to three car marts before I got the price I wanted, but I got it in the end. I hadn't left myself much time to work the jewellers, and most of them were shut for the week-end, but I found a hock shop and hocked the stuff for fifteen hundred: not what I hoped to get, but at least I could get the stuff back.
I now had a working capital of five thousand six hundred dollars, including my own two thousand. I could have done with more, but it was the best I could do at short notice.
I was lucky to catch a plane back to Los Angeles with no more than half an hour to wait, and I took a taxi back to the house.
I walked into the lounge as the clock was striking nine. I expected to see Helen, but instead there was a short fat guy sitting in one of the lounging chairs, smoking a cigar. He was around

ifty with a bulge in his vest that comes from over-indulgence. He had on an expensive-looking suit, hand-made shoes and there was a pearl stick-pin in his black satin tie.

The moment I set eyes on him I knew he was a creditor. I could tell by the steely look in his eyes and the wide, cheerful smile he gave me that was as false as a show-girl's eyelashes.

"I was expecting Mr. Dester," he said, getting to his feet. "Mrs. Dester said something about him coming back very soon."

"Mr. Dester won't be back for some days," I said. "I'm Glyn Nash, Mr. Dester's personal secretary. Is there anything I can do for you? I look after Mr. Dester's affairs when he is away."

The fat man frowned. "Well, I wanted to see Mr. Dester personally," he said in a complaining voice.

"Okay," I said, shrugging. "Let me have your name and address and I'll tell Mr. Dester when he returns. If he has the time, I'll arrange an appointment and I'll let you know."

"He's returning on Wednesday, you say?"

"I didn't say Wednesday. I don't really know when he will be back. He's pretty busy right now. I've just seen him off from San Francisco. He's on his way to New York. He might be back on Wednesday, he might not."

"New York?" The fat man's eyebrows lifted. "Perhaps I had better introduce myself. I'm Hammerstock." He showed his dead white bridgework in another of his false smiles. "Hammerstock and Judd, Wines and Spirits. I came about Mr. Dester's account."

I knew that he must be one of the biggest creditors, if not the biggest, and probably the most troublesome. If I could handle him, I should be able to handle any of them.

"Mr. Dester's account?" I said, looking puzzled. "What about it?"

"It's been owing too long." Hammerstick fumbled in his pocket. "We have written to Mr. Dester time and again. . . ."

"Mr. Dester has been far too busy recently to bother with small accounts," I said, walking over to the table and taking a cigarette from the box. "What's the trouble? Is your firm short of money?"

He turned a deep shade of purple.

"Short of money? I'll have you understand . . ."

"Okay, okay, then what's the excitement about? The deal Mr. Dester is handling right now has taken up all his time.

That's why he's engaged me to look after his private affairs. I'll let you have a cheque if you'll tell me what we owe you and I'll tell Mr. Dester you're anxious for him to settle the account."

"Is Mr. Dester handling a deal?" Hammerstock asked, looking at me with sudden interest.

"I'll say he is. Now he has left the Pacific, he's in demand. After all, he is the greatest producer in Hollywood, and he'll probably be the greatest factor in commercial television before long. It's a matter of arranging terms."

"Commercial television?"

"Yeah, but that wouldn't interest you. What is this account worth?"

"Four thousand dollars."

Well, that jolted me. I had expected it to be big, but not that big. How anyone could have swallowed four thousand dollars worth of whisky and still have kept alive beat me.

"It's been outstanding for over a year," Hammerstock went on, producing the account.

"Leave it on the table. I'll tell him." I lit my cigarette and looked thoughtfully at Hammerstock. "You know it suddenly occurs to me that Mr. Dester might not like you coming here. Some of these big shots get mad at the drop of a hat. I take it you are still interested in keeping his account, or maybe you're not?"

Hammerstock's eyes grew round; before he could say anything, I went on, "The idea behind this new scheme on which he is working is to open up television studios right here in Hollywood. Between you and me, and it's not to go further, a powerful combine, of which Mr. Dester is to be the chief in charge of production, is buying up one of the major film companies and taking over their studios. The deal's about ready to go through and when it does, Mr. Dester will be entertaining on a far more elaborate scale than before. His account will be pretty big for the firm who supplies him with liquor."

Hammerstock gulped.

"Why, I didn't know..." He began to put the account in his pocket, but I reached out and took it from him.

"I may as well settle this right away," I said. "It's not big. I guess I can let you have it in cash."

If he took the money I was sunk, but I have had enough experience of human nature to know it was unlikely.

His eyes nearly fell out of his head when I pulled out my roll of money: it looked big enough to choke a horse with. He grabbed back the account and said he was happy to wait. He

hadn't known the position. There had been so many rumours fly ing around. He saw now he had no business to have come ou here. He had been out of line listening to rumours. He was onl too pleased to allow Mr. Dester what credit he liked. He woul take it as a personal favour if I didn't mention to Mr. Dester h had called. He hoped that this little incident wouldn't prejudic me against the firm.

He would have gone on and on if I hadn't firmly eased him out of the room, into the hall to the front door.

I said I wouldn't mention his call to Mr. Dester, but I would ask him to draw a cheque so the account could be settled. Hammerstock said he wouldn't hear of it. I was not to say anything about the account. Mr. Dester could settle it in his own time.

When I closed the door after him, I leaned against it and laughed. I was still laughing when Helen came to the head of the stairs and stared down at me.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

HELEN came down the stairs, her eyes bright and a half smile on her lips. She moved across the hall to me.

"So you were successful. I thought I had better leave him to you as you were so confident."

"Did you hear him beg me not to send him a cheque?"

"The others may not be so easy."

"I'll handle them. Come into the lounge. There's still things to do."

As she walked with me to the lounge, she asked. "Did you get the money?"

"I've raised five thousand six hundred. It's not as much as I want, but with any luck, it'll do."

I went over to the liquor cabinet and made two drinks, then I sat down opposite her.

"How far do you trust your nerve?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Look, what we are planning to do will need pretty good nerves. Sooner or later we will have to take him out of the freezer and plant him somewhere. I won't be able to do that on my own. You will have to help me. It's not going to be easy. When his body is found and the murder hunt is on, the first person the police will suspect will be you. They'll suspect you because you come into the insurance money. You may come in for some tough questioning. Some smart dick may try to jump a surprise on you. If you keep your nerve you will be all right. We're going to fix this so that they will be convinced you couldn't have killed him although you had the motive. But while they are being convinced, you may have a rough time."

"My nerve is all right," she said quietly. "You don't have to worry about me."

"I guess that's right, but you may as well know what's ahead of us. We may get into a jam that looks bad. I'm not saying we will but we may. That's the time when a steady nerve pays dividends. If we get in a panic, lose our heads, we might easily throw our hands in before we need to. You mustn't forget we can go to the limit because if things go wrong we have always the letter to keep us out of real trouble."

She looked at me, her green eyes searching.

"Is your nerve so very good?"

"I can stand up to anything with three-quarters of a million as an incentive. What we've got to keep clear in our minds is that we haven't killed him. At the worst, we can get ten years in jail for fraud. If we remember that they can't panic us. Okay. Now we've got to take care of the next step. Is there anyone who will want to know where Dester is? Has he any friends?"

"No. At one time, of course, there were always people here, but when he began to drink, they dropped him."

"What about Burnett?"

"He's Erle's attorney. They never meet. Erle writes or telephones him. Burnett doesn't approve of him."

"So there is no one? You're absolutely sure? No relations who could suddenly appear and ask questions?"

"There is no one."

This seemed too good to be true, but I had to take her word. It had been the one thing that really bothered me.

"We've got to be careful. This guy Hammerstock will spread the rumour that Dester is handling a big deal. We want him to do that, but at the same time we don't want the rumour checked. Burnett might hear about it and make inquiries. We've got to have a tale for him. When the showdown comes, we've got to be able to convince the police that we didn't start the rumour. We've got to convince Burnett that the reason why we didn't contradict the rumour was because it gave us time to raise money to meet Dester's debts. You'll have to see Burnett and tell him there's no truth in the rumour that Dester is going into television."

She nodded. "But he will want to know where he is."

"Yes. I've got that angle taken care of. How do you get on with Burnett?"

She smiled. "Very well. He likes me."

I could understand that.

"Here's what you do: call him on Monday and ask him over. Tell him Dester has had an attack of D.T.'s, and you've persuaded him to take a cure. As soon as you can arrange it, he is going into a sanatorium. Tell Burnett there is a rumour going around that Dester is going into television. You must tell him there is no truth in the rumour, but as Dester is up to his eyes in debt, you are not contradicting the rumour as it is holding off his creditors. You feel sure that if he comes through the cure, he will get back into the money and will be able to pay off his debts. You are keeping his going into a sanatorium a secret."

She was listening intently, her eyes staring into mine.

"He will want to know where he is going."

"You can tell him. There is a sanatorium for alcoholics just outside Santa Barbara," I said. "I'll get you the name. It'll be in the telephone book."

"He might check up."

I smiled.

"He won't have a chance to do that. We'll have to take this one step at a time. First, you have to fix Burnett. We'll see how he reacts. This plan has got to be flexible. We only move forward when we know each step we take will be safe. If Burnett seems convinced and not likely to ask too many questions then bring me into it. Tell him Dester has taken a fancy to me. I started off as his chauffeur, and now he has turned his private affairs over to me. He gets me to handle his mail, his taxes and uses me as a buffer between himself and his creditors. Then call me in and introduce me."

"Must we bring Burnett into this?"

"Yes. If we don't, he'll be the first to make trouble. The police will want to talk to him and he has to know the background. He's got to accept me. When the showdown comes, it's essential we have him behind us."

"All right: I'll call him on Monday. But suppose the police find out Erle hasn't been to the sanatorium? They're certain to check."

"Don't worry about that. You can leave me to fix it. There is one more thing. To-morrow you must get a servant. There's an agency on 35th Street that provide staff at short notice. Call them up to-morrow and ask them to send a girl who can help you run this place."

She stared at me.

"I can run it myself. I don't want anyone."

"Use your brains. Can you imagine what the police will think if they find out that you and I are living under this roof on our own? They'll know we're lovers and that's something they've just not got to know. When they start their investigation they will find you and a servant and Dester sleep here, and I sleep in the apartment over the garage. I come over during the day when the servant is about. We never close a door. We never have a chance of making love. Do you understand? We must do it or we're heading for trouble."

"I don't like it, Glyn. It's dangerous."

"Not half so dangerous as not having her. When she ar

you must take her into your confidence. You must tell her Dester isn't well. He's in his room and he mustn't be disturbed. You are hoping to get him away for a change in a day or so. On Wednesday, he'll go to the sanatorium, providing I am satisfied we can go ahead. She must see him get into the car so she will swear she did see him leave the house."

"You mean you're going to let her see his dead body?" Helen said, her voice shooting up.

"No. For the love of mike, don't be so goddamn dumb. She'll see me come down the stairs wearing his hat and coat. We'll fix it so the light is bad. She'll see a man come down. With any luck she will never have seen Dester so she won't know the difference."

"It's too dangerous."

"It's not dangerous at all. I'm fixing it. Don't keep raising objections. Get the girl. That's all I want you to do. I'll do the rest of it."

"I hope you know what you are doing," she said uneasily. "If she's in the house how are we to get him out of the deep-freeze?"

"That's something I'll have to work out. One thing at a time."

"She could look in the deep-freeze."

"Yes, she could do that, but she won't. I'll fix something about that to-morrow before she comes. Right now I've got a lot of thinking to do. I've had a tough day. You'd better get some sleep."

"Are you sleeping here?"

"No. We're going to start right now as we will have to go on."

"You're leaving me alone here?"

I moved to the door. "You don't have to worry about him. He won't get up and bother you in the night."

I went into the hall, opened the front door and walked out into the cool, dark night.

As soon as I got into the apartment above the garage and had locked myself in, I undressed and got into bed. I lit a cigarette and began to grapple with my main problem: the foolproof, safe murder plan.

Sooner or later I would have to get his body out of the freezer, and put him somewhere where the police would find him. Having a servant in the house would complicate things, but I knew we had to have her. It would be quite an achievement to get the

body away from the house to some place without anyone seeing me, even if they didn't see the body which could be hidden under a pile of rugs at the back of the Buick. It couldn't be the Rolls: that was too well known.

At least I had time to concoct a plan. I had also to fake an alibi while I was planting his body, and the alibi had to stand up.

I had to think for Helen. I had to make sure she was also covered. I didn't kid myself that she would accept the situation if she slipped up and was caught. She would pull me in too. I was sure of that.

So I wrestled with the problem.

Soon after nine o'clock the next morning, I went over to the house and up the stairs to Dester's bedroom. As I reached the door, Helen appeared in the doorway of her room. She was still in her nightdress, over which she wore her oyster-coloured wrap.

I was tempted to dally: she looked pretty good in that getup, but there was work to do. I pushed the temptation behind me.

"You'd better get dressed. We have a lot to do," I said, and went into Dester's room. I took from the bottom of his wardrobe the two suit-cases in which I had brought back the whisky, put them on the bed and then taking down the bottles of whisky from the top of the wardrobe I put them into the suit-cases.

Helen came to the door. "What are you doing?"

"Sealing up the deep-freeze cabinet," I said.

"You're – what?"

I turned to look at her.

"I'm demonstrating to you that I have a few brains. That cabinet has got to stay closed, but at the same time, it mustn't be locked. Okay. The safest way to keep the lid shut is to put something on top of it that will cause an effort to remove. I'm stacking all these bottles on top of it so it will stay shut."

"It wouldn't be all that difficult to remove those bottles."

"That's right. It wouldn't be difficult, but no one in their right mind would do it. You'll tell this girl the deep-freeze is empty. Make it sound casual. She's not going to shift all these bottles to prove you are a liar. No one would be that dumb."

"It would be safer to lock it."

"That's what you think. It would make her curious. Ever heard of Pandora's box. It's the same set-up. Why lock an empty freezer? This is the way to do it, and this is the way it's going to be done."

By the time I had carried the bottles into the kitchen and set them out on top of the deep-freeze cabinet, Helen had put on a sweater and slacks and had joined me. She stood looking at the rows of bottles and at the cabinet. I saw the tenseness go out of her face. She could see now I was right.

"Did you look inside?" she asked.

"Yes. I looked inside. He's fine. You don't have to worry about him," I said. "Now come on, we've got things to do. We've got to put this house in order. When this girl comes, she's got to find a normal house in working order."

We slaved until midday. We cleaned, polished and aired the rooms. I went out into the garden and collected an armful of flowers. I left them with Helen while I went upstairs and got the room ready for the girl. I intended to put her in the room at the other end of the corridor because it was away from Helen's room, and the window looked out on to the east side of the garden away from the garage. While I was making up the bed I heard the telephone bell ring. I went to the head of the stairs, my heart thumping. Helen came out of the dining-room and looked up at me, her face pale and set.

"Go on – answer it," I said.

She went into the lounge.

I lit a cigarette and waited. I heard her talking, but I couldn't hear what she said. As I started down the stairs, I heard her hang up. She came out of the lounge.

"That was the *Hollywood Recorder*," she said as I joined her in the hall. "They wanted confirmation about the television job. I told them he was out of town and I knew nothing about his business."

"That's right." I thought for a moment. Hammerstock had certainly started to shoot his mouth off ahead of the gun, but that didn't matter so long as we knew. "Don't kid yourself they'll be content with that. They'll come out here. The rest of the Press will come too. I don't want them to find me here. You'll have to handle them. I'm going to take the Buick and clear out for the rest of the day. I've things to do. Get on to the agency now and get a girl. Call Burnett and fix a date for tomorrow. Call the Belle View sanatorium and ask them if they can take your husband. If they say they can take him right away, stall. We don't want to start anything until the end of the week. Will you do that?"

She said she would.

"Then I'll get off. I'll be back some time to-night. You've got it all clear?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Never mind what I'm going to do. You look after this end. I'll look after my end. If you get a girl, tell her Dester is in his bedroom. Take her into your confidence. Tell her he is ill and no one must know because it may upset a deal he is putting through."

"She'll probably tell all her friends," Helen said sharply. "We can't do that."

"Her friends don't count. So long as she doesn't tell the Press or his creditors, it doesn't matter. Anyway, with any luck, she won't have the chance to tell anyone until we've taken the next step, and then it doesn't matter, but she's got to know he is upstairs in his room and ill. She's got to know that."

"Why don't you tell me what you are planning?" she asked impatiently. "Why be so damned mysterious?"

"I'm not being mysterious. I'm taking it one step at a time. I don't even know myself how it's going to be worked, but I'll have an idea by the time I get back."

I left her, went over to the garage, got out the Buick and drove out on to the avenue. I headed through Glendale and on to Highway 101. I took it easy. It was a hot, clear day without a hint of smog, and by that time, there was a lot of traffic on the highway. I stopped at Ventura for lunch, then, around three o'clock, I pushed on through Benham to Santa Barbara. I took a look at the Belle View sanatorium that was tucked away with its own bathing beach and its own ten-foot-high walls. I had a feeling, looking at those walls, that once a drunk was inside, he would have a lot of trouble getting out again.

I turned the car and pottered around the district like any lonely business man taking the Sunday afternoon air, but I kept my eyes open, got used to the locality, spotted two State police points about four miles apart before which sat troopers on their motor cycles, watching the traffic with cold, alert eyes. About fifteen miles out of Santa Barbara, just beyond Carpinteria, a narrow, dirt road, leading off the highway, attracted my attention. I swung the car on to it, and after driving a mile I came out on to a forestry station. There were three large wooden huts and twenty acres or so of young pines and firs under cultivation. I parked the Buick, pushed open the barbed-wire gate and had a walk around. The place was deserted. I peered through the windows of the huts: one of them was a lab., the other two were

offices. I imagined they would be full of industrious workers during the week, but on a Sunday, it looked like the place I had been hunting for.

I had nearly got it right now: the forestry station was the clincher.

It was after nine-thirty when I drove through the gateway and parked before the garage. Looking across at the house I could see lights on in the lounge. I wondered how Helen had made out while I had been away. I wondered if she had got the girl and how she had handled the Press. I got out of the car and walked over to the house, opened the front door and entered the hall.

I stood for a moment, listening: I thought I heard someone turn the page of a book. I moved across to the lounge and stood in the doorway.

A girl sat in one of the lounging chairs, a book in her hand, the light from one of the standard lamps falling fully on her. She was dark; her black, glossy hair had brown tints in it, and it fell to her shoulders in long, natural waves. She was perhaps twenty-three or four, and pretty. She looked up and I saw her eyes were Wedgwood blue.

All the women I know and have known came under the category of floozies, smarties, diggers and come-on girls. They all knew their way around. If the word 'virgin' was mentioned, they thought it was in connection with the condition of the soil. I had seen plenty of nice girls coming out of college, at the movies and walking the streets, but I had never bothered with them. I was sure I wouldn't get what I wanted from them, and they were so uch waste of time. So I let them alone.

This girl, sitting in the lounging chair, looking at me, came der the category of a nice girl. I could tell that not only by her open, natural expression, but by her frock, the shoes she wore and the way she did her hair.

"Hello there," I said. "I guess you must be the new help." I came down the three steps into the lounge and went over to the bar. "I'm Glyn Nash: did Mrs. Dester mention me?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Nash," the girl said, putting down her book. She got to her feet. "I'm Marian Temple."

"Glad to know you." I sloshed whisky into a glass. "Would you like a drink, Miss Temple?"

She smiled and said she didn't drink. She had a nice, bright, friendly smile: nothing subtle about it; no come-on, no sex.

I squirted charge water on top of the whisky, fished out an ice cube, stirred the mixture and took a long drink.

"Is Mrs. Dester around?" I asked.

"She's sitting with Mr. Dester."

I lit a cigarette, carried my drink to a chair near hers.

"Sit down, Miss Temple. I didn't mean to interrupt your reading. Got something good there?"

She sat down.

"I'm on the third volume of Gibbons' *Decline and Fall*," she said. "Have you read it?"

"Not the third volume," I said gravely. "You mean the Roman Empire stuff?"

She said that was what she meant.

"Isn't it a little solid? I go for pulp magazines myself. Raymond Chandler is about the highest I aim at."

She laughed. "I'm planning to go to Rome next fall. I wanted to get the background."

"You are? Why Rome?"

"Oh, I've always wanted to go there – and Florence too."

"What's the matter with Paris? There's more excitement in Paris so I'm told."

"I'll settle for Rome."

I finished my drink and sat nursing the glass, looking at her. It occurred to me she wasn't what I imagined a help to look like. This kid was like someone just out of college.

"Is that why you've taken this job? Saving up for Rome?"

She nodded. "I'm going to be an architect. I have my finals at the end of next year. I thought this job would give me that little extra while I complete my reading."

"Yeah." I didn't quite know what to make of this. I wasn't sure if Helen had made a mistake or not. I would rather have had a dumb cluck with no brains than a girl like this who was obviously nobody's fool. "Well, I don't think Mrs. Dester will work you to death."

She shook her head and laughed.

"She's just wonderful. She told me I could use this room when she wasn't using it herself. I feel quite at home already."

I stretched out my legs. "She told you about Mr. Dester?"

"Yes. Isn't it a shame? I've seen all his pictures. I think he is the best director of them all."

"That's right. Have you ever seen him?"

She shook her head.

"Only pictures of him. Why do you ask?"

I pulled a face.

"Well, you know: he's been working too ha

a lot. His nerves are all shot. She told you he's going to the sanatorium as soon as they can take him?"

"Yes."

I gave her an out-of-the-corner-of-my-eyes stare. She fascinated me. We had been talking now for six or seven minutes and she hadn't once tried to show me her knees nor flutter her eyelashes at me.

"Well," I went on, getting to my feet, "I guess I'll go up and see how he is before I go back to my apartment. I live over the garage."

"Yes, Mrs. Dester said you did."

She was looking up at me, her big blue eyes interested.

"Sorry if I took you away from Gibbons."

"Oh, that's all right. I have to work at it: it's not easy reading."

"I can imagine."

She smiled, then as I started across the lounge, she opened her book again and bent her glossy head over it. I paused in the doorway to look at her. It crossed my mind that the difference between her and Helen was the difference between a pearl and a diamond. Helen had all the hard, glossy glamour of a diamond; this kid had the soft, smooth beauty of the pearl.

She looked up and caught me staring at her and she blushed. That knocked me. No girl I had ever been around with knew how to blush. I grinned at her, turned and went up the stairs, three at a time.

Helen was in her bedroom, smoking, and going through a ιack of documents, bills and letters that she had spread out on the bed. She looked up as I came in.

"Going over old love letters?" I asked, closing the door and leaning against it.

"I thought you said we weren't to be alone together when she was in the house?"

"That's right, but right now she and Gibbons are keeping each other company, and I told her I was going to sit with Dester. What's all the junk?"

"What do you think? I'm trying to find out how much he owes."

"You've got a sweet job. Did you start the list with Hammerstock's four thousand?"

"I've got up to twenty-two thousand and there are still more."

"You don't have to worry. If we get the insurance money, we'll still have something left. What's been happening?"

"Burnett is coming to see me at three o'clock to-morrow. Four newspaper men have been here. Luckily Marian arrived before they did and I let her handle them."

"You let her handle them?"

"Yes. She told them Dester was out of town and I was out. They didn't get anything out of her. I was listening in the lounge. She was good."

"I'm not sure if you've picked the right one. That girl's got brains."

"I had no choice. She was the only one the agency sent. I had to take her. Anyway, she may have brains, but she's only a kid."

I went over and sat in a lounging chair.

"How about the sanatorium?"

"They can take him any time. I said I would call back."

"Tell them he'll arrive around eleven next Sunday night."

She stared at me. "Sunday night? Why not before?"

"I won't be ready before."

"What are you planning to do?"

"Maybe we'd better not talk here." I looked at my strap watch. "Come over to my place when she's gone to bed. It's after ten-thirty now. She won't stay down there much longer. Have you got a good road map of the district that takes in Santa Barbara?"

"I think so."

"Bring it with you. Don't forget to take a meal up to Dester's room before you go to bed. He's got to eat or she'll begin to wonder what it's all about."

"I've already done that."

That was one of the important things about her. She wasn't dumb.

"What did you do? Eat it yourself?"

"I flushed it down the toilet."

"Well, okay, just so long as she doesn't think you are starving him." I moved to the door. "Did you tell her about the deep-freeze?"

"Not yet. I'll tell her when I show her the kitchen to-morrow."

"I'll be waiting for you."

I half opened the door, listened, then hearing no sound I stepped out into the corridor and walked to the head of the

stairs. As I began to descend them, Marian came out of the lounge. She looked up at me.

"Mrs. Dester has gone to bed." I said. "You going too?"

"Yes."

I came down and stood beside her.

"You and Gibbons?"

She blushed a little and then smiled.

"Well, I don't think I'll read in bed."

"I'll turn off the lights. Good night."

She said good night and ran up the stairs. I turned slowly and watched her. She had lovely, slim legs, boyish hips and square shoulders. She didn't look back as she went along the corridor to her room. I was still standing there, seeing her in my mind, when I heard her door close.

I went into the lounge, took a bottle of Scotch from the rack behind the bar, turned off the lights and walked over to the apartment above the garage. Some kid, I was thinking. She and Gibbons. Some kid.

Around twelve-thirty, Helen came into my bedroom. I had changed into pyjamas and I was lying on the bed, smoking. She came to the foot of the bed.

"Now, tell me," she said.

I looked at her. There are moments when a diamond can look a lot more exciting than a pearl. This was one of them.

"Come here," I said and stretched out my hand.

She came around the side of the bed and sat down near me.

"Okay," I said, "now let me explain the setup to you. Between now and Sunday the rumour that Dester is once more in the money is going to strengthen. The columnists won't want to be left out in the cold. Even if they don't get any confirmation, they'll hint that Dester is after a big job. That's just the situation we want. No one knows where he is, but they have an idea he is back in the money again. If it doesn't work out that way, I'll have to fan the flames. There are two reasons why we must create the idea he is back in the money: one is to hold off his creditors and the other is that he is going to be kidnapped."

She stiffened. "Kidnapped?"

"That's right. No one would kidnap him unless he was back in the money, would they?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Relax: I'll explain it to you. We want to create the impression that Dester is still alive. We want it known when the showdown comes that Dester left this house on next Sunday night

around ten o'clock in the evening with you to take a cure at the Belle View sanatorium. That's where Marian comes in: she's going to be our witness. She'll think she'll see Dester leave this house, but it won't be Dester, it'll be me, impersonating him. I'll wear that camel-hair coat and the big hat he has in his closet. We'll go into details later, but this is the plan. Marian must see me as I go out to the Rolls. We've got to fix it so she only sees my back. We drive down to the gates. You stop and I take off the hat and coat. You wait there while I rush back to the house, making out to Marian that I've arrived just too late to say good-bye to Dester. I'll talk to her for a few minutes, then I'll tell her I'm going back to my apartment. You'll have told her you'll be back soon after midnight, but she is not to wait up for you. I'll go over to my apartment, turn on the lights and the radio loud enough for her to hear from her bedroom. Then I'll leave the apartment and join you. We'll go to a place I've found. The idea we want the police and Maddux to get hold of is that while you are driving Dester to the sanatorium, two hoods hold up the car, take you both to this place, tie you up and then kidnap Dester."

Helen stared at me.

"Tie me up – what do you mean?"

"What I say," I said impatiently. "How much plainer have I got to make this before the nickel drops? You can't expect to get your hands on three-quarters of a million and not work for it."

"I still don't follow what you mean. Where is this place you're talking about?"

"Did you bring the map?"

She gave me the map and I found the forestry station and showed it to her.

"It's the ideal place," I said. "There's not a soul around on a Sunday. You can stay in one of the huts and you'll be found first thing on Monday morning. You'll spend an uncomfortable night, but so what?"

"But why should I?" she demanded, frowning at me.

"For the love of mike! We've got to create the impression that Dester has been kidnapped!" I exclaimed, raising my voice. "Can't you get that into your thick skull? Look, there has been no major kidnapping in Hollywood for years. When the news breaks every cop will be on his toes. The heat will be on. No just suppose he had really been kidnapped by two hoods. Th find the cops closing in. What do they do? Turn Dester loose

he can give the police a description of them? No, they lose their heads. They kill him and dump him somewhere and vanish. This is the only angle I can figure to make his murder make sense. Otherwise the police will look for a motive, and you and I are the only two who have a motive. To make us safe, this has to be a motiveless murder, and kidnapping supplies the answer."

She drew in a long, slow breath.

"I want to think about this. It sounds too complicated."

"It isn't. It's going to work."

"We could so easily make a mistake when it's this complicated."

"We have the whole week to get the details lined up. If we're not happy about it at the end of the week, we'll drop it. We can do this job, step by step, watching every move, waiting to see how the cops react before we show our next card. Then if the cards fall right, we dump his body and collect the insurance money. It's going to work. I have a feeling about it."

"I want to think about it."

"Sure, think about it, but this is the plan. We can't lose too much time. Sooner or later, someone will really want to know where Dester is. We've got time, but not all the time in the world."

She began to get to her feet.

"Where do you think you're going?" I asked, staring at her.

She stood up, her green eyes expressionless.

"Back to my room."

I shook my head. "Not just yet."

I grabbed hold of her arm, but she broke my grip and moved out of reach.

"I'm not your chattel," she said in a low, fierce voice. "Keep your hands off me!"

She went out of the room and slammed the door.

Automatically I reached for the whisky bottle, then, as my hand closed around it, I realized what I was doing, I snatched my hand away. If there was one thing she wasn't going to do, she wasn't going to turn me into a rum-dum like Dester.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

ON Monday afternoon, Edwin Burnett arrived. He was short, plump, suave and immaculate.

Helen handled him beautifully. From my vantage point at the head of the stairs I could hear the scarcely conquered tears in her voice as she told him how Dester was so much worse and was now having hallucinations.

Burnett seemed pretty shocked.

"You can't remain in the same house with him if he is like that. He should be in a home."

That gave her her opening. She told him Dester had agreed to go to the Belle View sanatorium. He was so ashamed of himself he had begged her not to tell anyone that he was going. Then she got around to the rumour and his creditors.

I gave her full marks. She almost convinced me. Burnett agreed that there was no point in letting anyone know that Dester was going into the sanatorium. If they were fools enough to believe rumours then that was their lookout. But he went on to warn Helen that it was unlikely Dester would ever be in a position to pay his debts.

"It might be possible to arrange some kind of settlement for you before the crash comes," he went on. "That is if you would be willing to divorce him. There should be a few thousand left, and I think I could get it for you."

"I couldn't desert him, Edwin," Helen said. "It is now he really needs me. I know we haven't got on well together in the past. He has been so exasperating, but now that he is really down, I couldn't leave him."

They went on like this for half an hour, then she brought the subject around to me. She told Burnett how I had saved Dester's life, how he had engaged me as his chauffeur and how I had looked after him.

"He really is useful, Edwin. In fact I don't know what I should do without him. Erle is violent sometimes and Nash is so good with him."

She called me down and when I got into the lounge, Burnett looked me over. His steel grey eyes lost their expression of charm and compassion, and I saw only the eyes a criminal in [illegible]ck would see.

Helen introduced us and I was pretty deferential. We talked of this and that for a few moments, then Helen did a nothing-up-my-sleeve, nothing-in-my-hand act when she said, "Mr. Nash sleeps in the apartment over the garage. I have Marian with me in the house. If I hear Erle in the night, I phone across to Mr. Nash. I can't tell you how thankful I am that he is looking after Erle, but he can't go on having interrupted nights. It's time Erle went to the sanatorium."

"I don't mind," I said. "I like him. We get on all right."

"Well, is there anything I can do? Would you like me to go up and talk to him?" Burnett asked, after sneaking a quick look at his watch.

"I don't think he feels like seeing anyone," Helen said. "I am taking him to the Belle View next Sunday. I'm hoping when he comes out, he'll be all right again. I can't believe he won't ever make any more pictures. I've suggested we go to New York. He might start again there."

Burnett shrugged. "Don't rely on it, Helen. I think you'd be a lot wiser to divorce him. He's always going to be in trouble from now on."

"You know about his affairs better than I do," she said as I moved away so as to let them talk. "Is there really some money left, Edwin?"

"Not much I'm afraid; a few thousands, but once his creditors move in, there won't be anything left. He'll have to sell up. Have you any idea how much he owes?"

"Mr. Nash probably knows." She turned to me. "You can tell Mr. Burnett how much he owes, can't you?"

"I haven't got exact figures," I said, "but it must be something like twenty-five thousand."

Burnett shrugged.

"Well, if he can't pay, he'll have to go bankrupt. This isn't going to be nice for you, Helen."

Then she said something that turned me as cold as a splinter of ice. She said, "He's not insured, I suppose? Nothing he could borrow money on?"

"There's a life policy I believe," Burnett returned. "I know he mentioned taking one out soon after he married you, but he didn't tell me what it is worth. Of course, if it is for a substantial amount he could borrow on it."

"Well, that's something." She smiled. "I'll have to talk to him about it. Better to borrow on it than go bankrupt."

"I don't know." Burnett scratched the end of his fat nose.

"After all, at the rate he is going, Helen, he won't last very long. I don't want to distress you, but drinking the way he does could finish him off quicker than you think. The money would then come to you. If he borrows on the policy there won't be much left when he dies and you've got to think of yourself."

"Oh, no. I can always look after myself." She lifted her head proudly. It was a good act and I saw now why she had dragged in the policy. "I would much rather him borrow the money on the policy than for him to go bankrupt."

Burnett looked approvingly at her.

"It does you credit, Helen. Damn it! It really does. Well, it may not come to that. Let me know how he gets on and if I can do anything. You have only to call me."

He shook hands cordially enough with me, and then Helen saw him to the door. They stood talking for a few moments, then he got into his chauffeur-driven car and was driven off.

She came back and we looked at each other.

"Pretty smart: the ever-loving, ever-sacrificing wife," I said. "For a moment you gave me a heart attack when you mentioned the policy."

She lifted her shoulders. "It was the way to do it."

"Yes. Well, that's the first hurdle taken care of. He's on our side now and we'll need him. Where's Marian?"

"In the garden."

"Okay. I'll get back to the garage. We don't want to be alone together."

Her full red lips twisted into a sneer.

"She's weeding the rose bed," she said. "You don't fool me. I've seen the way you've been looking at her. Can't you leave any woman alone?"

I felt the blood mount to my face. I had to hold on to myself or I would have crossed the room and slapped her.

"It's your rotten mind," I said angrily. "I don't go for kids like her."

"Tell that to the marines," she said, and moving past me, she went up the stairs.

I walked into the garden to cool off. I had no wrong feelings about Marian. Okay, the kid interested me. I liked to watch her. She was young and graceful and quick and pretty. I liked to talk to her too. She had more in her head than any other girl I had ever met. There hadn't been much to do in the house that morning and we had had time to talk. The kid just interested me. Helen's rotten insinuation made me feel sick.

The next day, some of the newspapers carried stories about Dester, hinting that he was moving into televison. One columnist, who had obviously been talking to Hammerstock, said Dester would soon be among the highest-paid producers in television. And that was just the story I wanted to see printed.

I was so elated I took the paper over to the house with the intention of showing it to Helen, but she was in her bath so I wandered down the long passage into the kitchen where Marian was sitting on a stool at the kitchen table, cleaning the silver.

She looked cute in a blue-and-white overall, and she glanced up as I came in and gave me a smile.

I've had a lot of experience with women, and that smile made my heart skip a beat. It wasn't a come-on smile: nothing like that, but there was a hint of shyness in it I hadn't seen before that told me I interested her as much as she interested me, and to my surprise I got a bang out of it.

"Hello there," I said, sitting on the edge of the table. "Let me give you a hand. I'm good at silver."

She passed me the polishing cloth. I talked of this and that for twenty minutes or so while we polished the silver, then I got around to the new movie that was showing that night at the Casino theatre.

"I wouldn't mind seeing it," I said. "I go for Bogart. How about you coming with me?"

She looked up, her eyes eager. "I'd love to, but perhaps Mrs. Dester can't spare me."

"Oh, sure. You don't have to work twenty-four hours a day. That'll be okay. I'll tell her. I'll meet you at the gate at seven. Okay?"

"Thanks. I'd love to. I think Bogart's keen myself. If you're sure . . ."

I found myself staring beyond her at the deep-freeze cabinet that stood against the wall. It gave me a sudden sick feeling as I visualized how Dester had looked the last time I had lifted the lid. I looked at the neat stack of bottles on the top of the cabinet, then I dragged my eyes away.

But there was something wrong. I couldn't make up my mind what it was, but there was something.

Then suddenly it jelled. I knew what was wrong! It hit me with the force of a sledge hammer.

*The motor of the cabinet was no longer running!*

"Is there anything the matter?"

Marian's voice came to me from out of a long, dark tunnel.

Somehow I dragged my eyes from the deep-freeze cabinet and looked at her.

"What did you say?" I asked stupidly.

She pushed back the stool and stood up. Her face was startled; fear was rising in her eyes. "What is it?"

I got hold of myself. I was in such a panic I could have thrown up.

"What's the matter, Mr. Nash? Aren't you well?"

I grinned at her. My mouth felt frozen.

"I don't know," I said. "I feel pretty bad. Something maybe that's disagreed with me. Don't look so scared. I'll be all right."

She came quickly to me and put a cool hand on my forehead. I suddenly wanted to let her hold me, shut me out of the nightmare of Dester, the deep-freeze and what I had got myself into.

"You'd better lie down."

I made a bigger effort, pulled away from her and patted her shoulder.

"I'm all right. Will you go into the lounge and get me a big whisky? I'll be fine after a drink."

She went quickly out of the kitchen and I heard her running down the passage towards the lounge. Slowly, I went over to the freezer. The switch that controlled the motor was fixed to the wall just by the cabinet. Someone had turned it off. Gently, with a shaking hand, I turned the switch down and heard the motor rumble into life. How long had it been off? What effect had it had on Dester? The temperature in the freezer was such that if the motor failed or was turned off, there would be no change in the contents of the freezer for at least four hours. Had it been off longer than that? Had this mysterious turn-off ruined my plan?

I turned off the switch and was moving away from the cabinet when Marian returned, a glass of neat whisky in her hand. I took it from her and tipped the contents down my throat. Then I set down the glass and smiled at her.

"I'm okay now. I'm sorry if I scared you. I must have eaten something . . ." I let it hang in the air.

"Are you sure you are all right?"

She stood close to me, looking up at me, her Wedgwood-blue eyes anxious. I think that was the moment when I fell in love with her, although it had been coming on now for the past hours. But I think this was the moment when I became aware of it. I didn't want to grab her: not that kind of love. I wanted her to

put her arms around me and make me feel cared for and safe.

"I'm fine now," I said, moving away from her because I didn't trust myself that close to her. It was an experience I had never known before – to back away from a girl, and it shook me. "I don't know what got hold of me." I looked across at the deep-freeze cabinet again. "Sounds as if the motor's off."

"Shouldn't it be? I turned it off."

I passed my tongue over my dry lips.

"When did you do that?"

"Oh, about twenty minutes ago. Mrs. Dester said it was empty. It seemed odd to me to leave the motor running. I'm like that, I hate waste." She smiled. "So I turned it off."

I crossed the room and flicked down the switch.

"Maybe you've never seen the inside of one of these things," I said. "After they've been in use some time they get a heavy coating of frost. If you turn off the motor, the frost thaws and the cabinet gets a lining of water. That's not good for it. So we keep the motor running because we never know when we're going to put something in the freezer."

My voice sounded strange to my ears, but the story seemed to go down all right.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. I won't touch it again."

"No harm done. The frost stays as it is for four hours or so after the motor's turned off." I started for the door. "Well, I've got to be moving along. I'll see you to-night. You won't forget?"

She said she wouldn't forget.

It took me most of the day to get over the shock, but I got over it, and I didn't tell Helen.

We went to the movie that night. We went dancing on Wednesday night. On Thursday night I arranged to take her to the Foot-hills Club.

While all the evening activity between Marian and me was going on, Helen and I were working on the plan during the day. She would give Marian some task to keep her busy, and then slip across to the garage apartment and we'd get down to the details of the plan. There was a lot to work out: we had to have our stories pat. I found she was every bit as good at inventing as I was.

On this Thursday evening, she had been with me since three o'clock. We had nearly got the background of the plan worked out. It was now getting on for twenty minutes to seven, and I had promised to meet Marian at the gates at seven. Helen showed

no signs of going and I was getting restless.

"Well, okay, we needn't drive it into the ground," I said. "We've got nearly everything lined up and we've still got until Sunday. I'm going to change now. I'm going out."

She sat in a lounging chair, watching me, a jeering expression in her eyes.

"I thought to-night we might go out together, Glyn," she said. "I've been neglecting you."

I looked at her and it gave me a shock to realize how my feelings towards her had changed. At one time, just to look at that beautiful lush body and into those hard, glittering eyes, would have turned me into a pot of mush, but not now. I could see beyond the beauty. I knew what that cold, lovely mask of her face hid. I had learned better.

"It's not safe for us to be seen together, Helen. You know that."

"All right. Then let's make a night of it here. I'm in the mood to-night."

"Sorry," I said. "I've got a date."

She crossed one shapely leg over the other and smiled at me. "May I ask who with?"

"That's my affair."

"I hope it's not with Marian, because she's doing a job for me that'll keep her busy until her bedtime."

I looked at her, feeling the blood rise to my face.

"She's coming out with me to-night."

"I've already told her she is not to go out. After all, Glyn, I engaged her. She is my servant and she takes her orders from me." She got slowly to her feet. "You mustn't forget you're only the hired help yourself: the unofficial nursemaid to a dead man. Don't forget that, Glyn."

"Marian and I are going out to-night," I said evenly. "Tell her you don't want her. Do you hear?"

She laughed. "Don't be a fool. A girl like that is no use to you, and you are no use to her. You'd better stop this before it goes too far. You and I are linked together: not you and she."

"She's going out with me to-night."

"All right, if you want to make a fool of yourself, go and tell her. She won't go with you, and she'll wonder why the hired help thinks he can countermand an order from me."

She had me.

"Okay," I said. "Then get out of here."

She stared at me, lifting her beautiful eyebrows.

"I said I was in the mood, Glyn."

"Get the hell out of here!" I said, glaring at her. "I don't give a damn what mood you're in."

"So you are in love with her, you poor fool," she said. "I wouldn't have believed it."

She turned and went out of the room and down the stairs, leaving me hating her as I had never hated any other woman before.

I spent the rest of the evening sitting in an armchair, a bottle of Scotch within reach, while I thought of what I could have been doing if Helen hadn't shoved in her oar, and cursing her.

I wondered how Marian was feeling about it, and I had an idea that although she would be disappointed, she wouldn't be surprised. Each night she had gone out with me, she seemed to wonder why Helen didn't want her.

Around ten-thirty I got fed up with my own company. I got to my feet, turned off the light and went over to the house. The lights were on in the lounge. I didn't go in, but moved around the path until I could see through the window.

Helen was reading and smoking. Marian was sitting away from her, busily sewing some white silk thing that probably Helen had given her. The gramophone was playing. I stood out in the darkness watching Marian, listening to the music until the record finished, then as she got up to turn off the gramophone, I walked back to my apartment, undressed and got into bed. I lit a cigarette and lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling.

I knew now that I was in love with Marian. I knew too that I wanted to marry her. This was the first time I had ever wanted to marry a girl, and the thought gave me a queer feeling of excitement. She and I, I told myself, could go to Rome together. She could go on with her studies, and I'd be around to love her, to listen to her talk, to see the things with her that she wanted to see in Rome.

I wondered then if I should go ahead with this plan of mine to get hold of the insurance money. Suppose Marian found out what I was planning to do? I didn't have to wonder how she would react. It would be the finish between us. But if I didn't go ahead where was the money to come from to marry her and take her to Rome?

I lay thinking and smoking until well past two getting nowhere. I was half inclined now to chuck the plan, but I kept thinking of the dollars. This was my one chance of laying my

hands on real money. If I didn't go ahead, I would have to start working again and I knew what that meant. Thirty bucks a week, liquor, talk, and plodding from office to office; that wasn't the kind of life I would want to share with Marian.

Sick of my thoughts, I swung my legs off the bed and got up. I decided to take a bath in the hope I'd go to sleep when I returned to my bed, and as I moved over to the bathroom, I happened to look out of the window that overlooked the west side of the house. I stopped, standing motionless, feeling my heart skip a beat. I could see the kitchen window with the moonlight reflecting on the glass. I saw a flicker of a light from behind the window as if someone had turned on a flashlight for a moment and then turned it off.

With shaking hands I pushed open my window and leaned out, staring towards the kitchen window. I saw the light again, then suddenly the lights in the kitchen went on.

What was happening? Who was in the kitchen? Was it Helen or Marian or some sneak thief?

I turned, grabbed up my dressing-gown, flung it on and went out of the apartment and down the stairs as fast as I could travel. I raced across the closely cut lawn and reached the kitchen window, my breath whistling between my clenched teeth and my heart pounding.

Cautiously, I looked through the uncurtained window, and what I saw going on in the kitchen made the hair on the back of my neck lift into bristles.

Marian was standing by the deep-freeze cabinet. She was wearing a pair of pale blue nylon pyjamas and her feet were bare. She was removing the bottles of whisky from the top of the cabinet. As I watched her, I realized she must have been in the kitchen some minutes, for there were only six more bottles to come off the top before she had stripped it clear.

Fifteen yards from where I was standing was the back door that opened on to a short passage that led to the kitchen. I left the window and darted to the door, turned the handle and pushed, but the door was locked and bolted. I wasted three precious minutes while I tried to force the door open by putting my shoulder against the panels and shoving with all my strength. I might just as well have tried to push over the Empire State Building for all the reaction I got.

I was in the worst panic I'd ever been in: so scared I couldn't think. When it dawned on me that I couldn't get in by the door, I blundered back to the window with the intention of hammer-

ing on the glass to stop her opening the cabinet, but when I got back to the window, I saw I was too late. She had cleared off the last bottle, and even as I looked through the window, my breath rattling against the back of my throat, my heart racing, I saw her lift the lid and look inside.

Her back was turned to me so I couldn't see her face. I expected her to drop the lid, start back and begin to scream loud enough to take the roof off, but she didn't. She stood absolutely motionless, her hands holding up the lid of the cabinet, her dark, glossy head inclined forward as she looked into the cabinet.

It was then that my mind began to function, and I saw that the window-latch hadn't been fastened. I got my finger-nails under the window-frame and pushed it up. As I did so, she slowly shut the lid. Then she turned, and for the first time since I had arrived at the window, I could see her face. It was completely expressionless, and her big, blue eyes were as vacant and empty as the eyes of the dead.

I realized with a sense of shock that jarred me down to my heels that she was walking in her sleep.

Then, just as I was getting over that shock, I ran into another for, looking across the kitchen to the half-open door, I saw Helen standing in the doorway, her cold, beautiful face set and white and her green eyes glittering. I saw she had a .25 automatic in her hand which she was pointing at Marian.

"Wait!" I said in a forced whisper. "Don't move."

She looked across at me, then at Marian who was now methodically putting the bottles back on the top of the cabinet.

I swung my leg over the window-sill and slid into the kitchen. "She's walking in her sleep," I said. "Don't wake her."

elen lowered her gun hand. She drew in a long, slow breath. ould see her breasts rising and falling under the oyster-coloured wrap.

I circled the room until I reached her.

"She's seen inside," she said softly.

"She's asleep."

"I don't care. We've got to get rid of her!"

"Keep your voice down. We mustn't wake her."

We stood away from the door and watched Marian replace the bottles. It took her some time, but finally she put the last bottle in place. She had put the bottles back exactly as she had found them. If I hadn't seen her move them, I wouldn't have known they had been touched.

Then she turned and walked slowly to the door, turned off

the light, switched on her flashlight and went down the passage. We stood in the darkness, listening. We heard her mount the stairs. A few seconds later, we heard a door close quietly.

I reached out and put on the light.

"She saw him!" Helen said fiercely. "She'll remember. We'll have to silence her."

There was a vicious, murderous expression in her green eyes that shocked me.

"She was sleep-walking," I said. "She won't remember. She didn't even see him. She went through the motions of opening the cabinet, but she wouldn't know what was in it."

"How do you know? It would be safer if she met with an accident."

"Are you crazy?" I faced her. "That's the last thing that's going to happen. If there's a death here before they find Dester, we'll be in trouble."

"Not the way I'd arrange it. I'd take her up on the roof and push her off. We could always say she was walking in her sleep."

Her cold-blooded, matter-of-fact tone chilled me.

"I said no, and I mean no. She won't remember. I'm sure she won't."

She studied me, her face had a scraped bony look to it that made it seem as if it were chiselled out of stone.

"You want to keep her alive because you're in love with her," she said. "Well, I'm not going to endanger our plan because you've happened to fall in love with the little fool. I'm going to silence her."

his face set, his eyes bloodshot. He had a .38 automatic in his hand. I saw it distinctly before he slid his hand and the gun out of sight under the sheet.

"What do you want?" he said, his voice harsh. "Can't you knock before you come in?"

The sight of the gun rattled me, and I wondered if he knew Helen was waiting for him to die. Was he scared of her? Did he have the gun handy as a protection against attack?

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, standing in the doorway. "I thought you might be sleeping. I just wanted to know if you were going out to-night."

I saw him relax. "Come in, kid," he said. "I won't be going out to-night. I'm not feeling too well."

I shut the door and moved to the foot of the bed. It gave me a queer feeling to look at this man who I knew, dead, was worth three-quarters of a million dollars.

"Has Mrs. Dester gone out?" he asked abruptly, reaching for his glass.

"Yes, sir; at least the Cadillac's gone."

"She didn't say where she was going?"

"No, sir."

He finished the whisky and splashed more into his glass. His hand was so unsteady he spilt some of the whisky on the sheet.

"I think you should know that Mrs. Dester doesn't want me here," I went on. "She has told me twice to go."

He smiled: a hard, bitter smile. "That doesn't surprise me, kid. You take your orders from me."

"Yes, sir."

the light, switched on her flashlight and went down the passage. We stood in the darkness, listening. We heard her mount the stairs. A few seconds later, we heard a door close quietly.

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"You want to keep her alive because you're in love with her," she said. "Well, I'm not going to endanger our plan because you've happened to fall in love with the little fool. I'm going to silence her."

I reached out and grabbed hold of her shoulders, forcing her against the wall.

"I warn you: if you touch her I'll tell the police where he is! I mean it! You leave her alone or you'll never get the money!"

She wrenched free from my grip, her face white, her eyes on fire.

"All right, if you must act like a fool, then act like one, but you'll be sorry!"

She side-stepped me and went quickly out of the kitchen and up the stairs. For a long moment I stood looking after her then, when I heard her bedroom door click to, I went up to Marian's room. I listened outside the door then, hearing nothing, I gently eased the door open and looked in.

The moonlight fell directly across the bed. I could see Marian as she lay with her head on the pillow. Moving quietly into the room, I stood at the foot of the bed, looking d

She slept restlessly, murmuring and moving her head to and fro. Then suddenly she opened her eyes and lifted her head. She stared at me, catching her breath in a soft, strangled scream.

"It's all right," I said quickly. "It's only me."

She sat up, pulling the bedclothes up in front of her, her eyes alarmed.

"I just wanted to see if you were all right," I went on. "You've been walking in your sleep."

"Have I? You frightened me," she said, and relaxed back on the pillow. "I've been walking in my sleep?"

"Yes. I saw a light on in the kitchen. I came over. You were taking all those bottles off the top of the deep-freeze."

I watched her closely as I was speaking, but her face showed only surprise and bewilderment.

"I did dream about the cabinet. I was worried about the water in it. You said because I turned off the motor . . ."

I drew in a long, deep breath. It was all right. She hadn't seen him. She couldn't speak like this if she had.

"You silly kid, there was nothing to worry about. I told you it doesn't thaw out for at least four hours. You gave me a scare. I thought it was a burglar."

"I'm sorry. I haven't walked in my sleep for months."

"Well, don't do it again. I didn't mean to frighten you, but I wanted to see if you were all right."

She looked up at me, her eyes bright, a faint flush on her face. "I'm all right."

I came around the side of the bed. She smiled up at me and held out her hand. I took it, then I bent and kissed her. For a long moment our lips remained together, then I drew back.

"Go to sleep, kid."

"All right. Good night, Glyn."

I went out of the room and closed the door. As I walked down the passage, I felt I was treading on air.

## CHAPTER NINE

I HAD no chance of seeing Marian alone during Friday and Saturday: Helen saw to that. She got Marian to turn out the guest bedrooms, a job that kept her upstairs for most of the two days.

On Friday afternoon, Helen and I continued to work on the plan. She was smart enough to spot the falling off of my enthusiasm.

"What's the matter?" she asked as she lay back in the lounging chair in my sitting-room. "Are you getting scared or are you trying to make up your mind whether you can have Marian as well as the money?"

She had put her finger right on the spot.

"She's no use to you," she went on as I didn't say anything. "If you continue to make a fool of yourself, you'll regret it."

"Will you mind your own business?" I snapped at her. "I'm not scared and I'm going through with this, so shut up!"

She gave me a jeering smile and shrugged her shoulders.

We were all set to go. Everything now depended on the fall of the cards. If we didn't run into a State trooper, have a breakdown or meet someone at the wrong time, we would be all right, but we did have to have some luck.

"I think that covers it," I said after we had gone over the plan for the third time. "Don't forget, you will have to give your statement to the police after I have given mine. Don't add any details. Stick to what we have arranged. Don't let them rattle you."

She stared at me with her cold, hard eyes. "They won't rattle me. You watch it they don't rattle you."

"I'll watch it."

She got to her feet.

"Marian has some sewing to do for me to-night," she said as she moved to the door. "So don't wait in for her."

I didn't argue.

In a way I was glad not to see Marian. I was edgy, and the thought of Sunday sat on my mind like a lead weight. I had an idea that she might realize I had something on my mind. I knew after Sunday night I would have the police in my hair and I would also have Maddux to cope with. Right now I could walk

past a cop without seeing him. But after Sunday, a cop would be a lot more than a hunk of beef in a blue uniform.

I spent Friday night at a dance hall, dancing with one of the hostesses. If the cops checked up on my activities I wanted them to know I was just a regular guy. Saturday dragged by. I saw Marian for a few seconds, but Helen was with her. We exchanged glances and I noticed she gave me a second, sharper look. Maybe I was already beginning to show the strain.

In the afternoon I took the Buick, and driving at a steady thirty-five miles an hour, I went out to the road that led to the forestry station. It took me an hour and five minutes to get there. That meant when we left at half past ten on Sunday night, we would get to the forestry station around twenty to twelve. By that time the highway should be fairly free of traffic.

I didn't sleep much that night. I wondered if Helen was also lying in the darkness, thinking as I was. Somehow I doubted it. She seemed nerveless.

When I did eventually fall asleep, I slept late and didn't get up until past noon.

As I was leaving the garage apartment to go over to the house, I ran into Marian, coming down the drive.

I remembered Helen telling me that she was giving her the half-day off on Sunday, asking her to get back at ten. I had hoped that she would have left before now. I wasn't anxious to see her until this job was over.

"Hello there," I said, coming to a stop under the shade of a tree. "Where are you going?"

"To see a girl friend of mine," Marian said, looking up at me. There was a curious expression in her eyes. It was as if she were seeing me for the first time. I had trouble in meeting her eyes. "What are you doing?"

"I've some work to do. I shan't be going out until later."

Again she looked at me.

"Is there anything worrying you, Glyn?"

"Why no. What should be worrying me?"

She moved closer and put her hand on my arm.

"You look worried."

I forced a laugh.

"That's my natural expression. I wish I were coming wit[h] you. How are you after your sleep-walking act?"

"I'm fine." She paused, then went on, "I know I shouldn['t] say this, Glyn, but she is in love with you, isn't she?"

That jolted me. I stared at her.

"She? Who? What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Dester."

"Loves me? What put that idea into your head? Of course she doesn't."

"I think she does. She's deliberately stopping me seeing you. Besides, I can tell by the way she looks at you. Of course she's in love with you."

"You're wrong." I was pretty rattled now. If the police were to question her and she let out this bit of information, we would be in trouble. "She's got no use for me. If Dester hadn't insisted that I should stay she would have booted me out long ago."

Marian lifted her shoulders. I could see I hadn't convinced her. Then she launched another thunderbolt.

"Is Mr. Dester really in the house, Glyn?"

For a moment I couldn't believe I had heard aright. I felt I was losing colour. My mouth turned dry.

"Of course he is. What in the world . . .?"

"Are you sure?" She looked searchingly at me. "I have a feeling he's not in the house. I never hear a sound from his room. It's uncanny."

"He's there all right." I had trouble in keeping my voice steady. "I go in now and then to take a look at him. He's in a pretty bad way. He sleeps most of the time."

"I see." She hesitated, then went on, "Well, I don't think I'm going to stay much longer, Glyn. I don't like it here. There's an unpleasant atmosphere . . . I don't like Mrs. Dester."

"I won't be staying much longer myself," I said. "I hope you'll wait until I go. I'll miss you, Marian." I took her hands in mine. "I'm just hanging on until I get a legacy that's coming to me. Do you know what I'd like to do when I get the money?"

"What would you like to do?"

"Go with you to Rome."

She laughed. "You wouldn't really. Why?"

"I guess you know why. I guess I'm in love with you, kid."

She looked searchingly at me.

"Sure you don't say that to every girl you meet, Glyn?"

"I'm sure. Well, I'm not going to keep you. I may not get the money, but if I do, you might think about it. I wouldn't be in the way. We could even stay at different hotels. I wouldn't stop you working. Just so we could have the evenings together. Then later, if you feel you wanted to, we might – well, we could marry." I grinned at her. "People do."

I could see she was startled. "You certainly rush your fences, Glyn, but I will think about it."

I pulled her to me and kissed her.

"I'm crazy about you, kid."

She clung to me for a moment, then broke away.

"I must go. I'm late already."

I watched her hurry down the drive, then I walked slowly towards the house.

I didn't tell Helen what Marian had said about Dester not being in the house, but I was pretty worried. If the police questioned her, if they suspected Dester hadn't been in the house, she might underline their suspicions.

Later in the afternoon I put the first move of the plan into operation.

I drove the Buick to a car park, a couple of miles from Hill Crest Avenue and left it there. I told the attendant that I shouldn't be picking the car up until late that night. I took the bus back to the house, and for the rest of the afternoon and evening, Helen and I went over the plan together. We had gone over it so often we could have recited it in our sleep, but I knew the importance of being word perfect.

Around half past nine I went up to Dester's room and shut myself in. I took a suit-case from the closet and put it on the bed. I took off my suit and shoes and packed them in the case. Then I put on one of Dester's dark suits that fitted me pretty well and a pair of his nigger brown calf shoes. I laid his camel-hair coat on the bed and one of his wide-brimmed slouch hats.

I lit a cigarette and began to pace slowly up and down. My nerves were jumpy, my heart beat heavily.

I kept trying to think of Marian and trying to imagine us in Rome together. If it hadn't been for her, I told myself, I would have backed out at this last minute, but the only person I was kidding was myself.

I heard the Rolls pull up outside the house and I went to the window and looked out.

Helen had timed it to the second. It was two minutes past ten as she got out of the car. She was wearing a pale green summer frock, a small white hat and white gauntlets. She looked lovely as she swung the car door to and came up the steps and into the house.

A few moments later she entered the room.

"She's not back yet?"

I remained at the window looking down the dimly lit drive. "Not yet."

She joined me at the window. "Well, this is it."

She sounded calm, almost casual.

"Yes."

"Are you jumpy?"

"I'm all right."

"You'd better be."

I looked at her. Her green eyes were glittering and her face was as hard as stone. "This was your idea," she went on. "You're not so enthusiastic as you were. Get this girl out of your mind!"

"It's going to be all right, so shut up!"

"It had better be all right!"

I turned back to the window. I saw Marian coming up the drive. She walked quickly, swinging her handbag, and as she came under the porch light, I could see she was smiling.

"Here she is."

"All right. I'll go down and talk to her."

"Don't let her come beyond the kitchen door."

"I know what I have to do."

I gave her a few seconds, then I sneaked out and stood in the shadows at the head of the stairs.

She and Marian were in the lounge. I heard Helen saying, "I'm taking Mr. Dester to the sanatorium now. I was expecting Mr. Nash back. He went out in the car about an hour ago to get some cigarettes. He may yet be back in time. I can't imagine what's keeping him, but if he isn't back would you be ready to help me? Mr. Dester is very shaky. We may have to support him to the car. If you will stand in the kitchen doorway and keep out of sight, you can come to me if I need you. Don't let him see you. He's sensitive, and he doesn't want help."

Marian said, "Yes, of course, Mrs. Dester."

"I expect he'll be all right. I'm going up now."

I returned to the bedroom. The time was seventeen minutes past ten. I wished now I had left a bottle of whisky in the room. I wanted a drink pretty badly.

I heard Helen come up the stairs. She entered the room, leaving the door open.

"Can you manage, Erle?" she asked in a loud, clear voice. "Let me help you with that."

For a moment I stared stupidly at her, not realizing she was already into the act we had planned.

"Get on with it, you fool!" she whispered fiercely.

I pulled myself together.

"I can manage," I mumbled, making my voice deep and indistinct.

"The car's at the door," she went on. "You don't have to get fussed. There's no one in the house except me."

I mumbled again.

Helen pushed over the bedside table. It landed on the carpe with a thud. The glass of water and the bedside lamp smashed adding to the noise.

"Steady, darling," she said. "Look what you've done."

I mumbled again.

We looked at the clock on the over-mantel.

"Yes," Helen whispered.

I put on the camel-hair coat and the hat, pulling the hat well down over my face. I turned up the collar of the coat. Helen looked critically at me, then nodded.

We moved to the door. I paused and mumbled again.

"But, Erle, if I turn off the hall light, you may fall," she said, pitching her voice well up.

"It hurts my eyes," I said without opening my lips.

She went to the head of the stairs and turned the two-way switch up. The main light in the hall went out, leaving on only the four wall lights.

"Give me your arm, Erle."

We started down the stairs. I walked heavily and slowly, dragging my feet. My heart was banging against my side. Would Marian recognize me? I hunched my shoulders and slightly bent my knees, attempting to disguise my height. We got down the stairs into the hall.

The front door stood open. I could see the Rolls under the porch light. Helen had parked the car so that the light from the porch lamp fell only on the back of the car.

We went slowly down the steps. I could almost feel Marian's eyes watching us.

"I'll open the car door," Helen said.

I put a gloved hand on the side of the car as if to support myself while she opened the door. I got in and she shut the door.

Then she said, "I'll just get your case. I won't be a moment." She turned and went back into the house. I bent and pulled off Dester's shoes, ready to slip into my own shoes as soon as she returned with the suit-case. I heard her speaking to Marian. Then she came out, closed the front door, ran down the steps, got in

the car, slid the suit-case to me, started the engine and drove quickly down the drive. By the time we had reached the gates, I had changed my shoes and had wriggled out of the camel-hair coat. I got out of the car, took off Dester's suit and took my suit that Helen handed to me through the car window. I struggled into it.

"I'll be as quick as I can," I said.

She turned off the car's lights.

"Don't let her keep you."

That was easier said than done, but I had to show myself to Marian: it was the vital part of my alibi. I ran up the drive and when I saw the lights of the house I slowed to a quick walk. I entered the hall and paused. Marian came out of the lounge.

"You've got back?" I made out I was surprised. "I thought you were going to be late. Where's Mrs. Dester?"

"She's just gone."

"Gone? With Dester?"

"Yes."

"Damn it! I was supposed to be here. I've had a hell of an evening. The Buick broke down. I've been all this time, trying to fix it. In the end I took a bus back. I promised Mrs. Dester I'd get back to give her a hand with Mr. Dester."

I was aware that Marian was looking intently at me. There was a puzzled expression in her eyes.

"Did he go off all right?" I went on, stepping back into the shadows so she couldn't get a good view of my face.

"Yes. He's only just gone. Didn't you see the car?"

"I must have just missed it." I took out my cigarette-case, then lit a cigarette. "Well, I've got to call the sanatorium and tell them he is on his way. Mrs. Dester didn't call them, did she?"

"I didn't hear her."

"Look, you go to bed if you want to. I'll phone from the garage apartment."

"Mrs. Dester said she wouldn't be back before one o'clock," Marian said. "Won't you stay with me for a little while, Glyn? I want to talk to you."

That was just what I had been scared she would say.

"Not to-night, kid. I've got to fix the car yet. As soon as I've talked to the sanatorium, I'm going back to where I left the car."

"I could come with you, Glyn. I don't want to stay here alone."

I felt a trickle of sweat run down my face.

"Better not. She wouldn't want the house left. You stay her kid. No point in you coming . . ."

I tried not to over-play my hand, but I must have done it fo a look of alarm jumped into her eyes.

"Glyn! What is it? Why are you looking like this? Has something happened?"

Panic just below the surface nudged my temper.

"For the love of mike! I've been trying to get that goddam car to go!" I said, aware I was shouting at her but not able tc control my voice. "I've got to go back and get it going! I should have been here when Dester took off and you ask me if something has happened! Look, go to bed! Leave me to handle this, will you?"

She stepped back. I could see my vehemence had frightened and hurt her.

"Yes, of course."

She turned and went quickly up the stairs, and a moment later I heard her bedroom door shut.

I cursed.

If this was the way I was going to play my hand when I came up against the police and Maddux we were sunk.

Neither of us spoke until we were well clear of the house, then Helen said abruptly, "Did you have trouble with the girl?"

I was sitting beside her, sunk down in the seat, the wide-brimmed hat pulled well down over my eyes and the collar of the camel-hair coat turned up. I was still pretty rattled, and during the first quick rush down Hill Crest Avenue, I had been thinking of Marian, wondering what she was doing, wondering what she could be thinking.

"It was okay," I lied. "She wanted convincing, but I did it."

Helen looked sharply at me.

"We could have trouble with her. Why had you to make a fool of yourself over her?"

"Shut up!" I snarled at her. "I handled her, and don't drive so fast. Do you want a cop to come after us?"

She slowed down. "She could spoil this for us, Glyn. We may have to do something about her."

"I tell you I handled her! She loves me. She wouldn't give me away."

"I'm not thinking of you. I'm thinking of myself. She doesn't love me. I have an idea she doesn't believe Erle was ever in that room."

I felt a cold, spooky sensation run through me.

"You're crazy! She would have told me if she had thought hat."

"Did she tell you?"

"Of course not!"

Again she looked at me. In the light of the dashboard I could ee the glitter in her eyes.

"We made a mistake having her. I'm sure of it."

"We had to have her. Now shut up, will you? I've got things o think about."

The highway was almost empty. Every now and then we over-cok a big oil truck or a truck hauling oranges to San Francisco. We only met five or six private cars, and they were going flat out, heading towards Los Angeles.

Then Helen said suddenly, "There's a speed cop behind us."

That really jolted me. My heart skipped a beat and I felt sweat break out on my body. I looked quickly over my shoulder and through the rear window.

She was right.

Not more than thirty yards behind us I could see the yellow light of the big motor-cycle lamp and the outline of the flat cop cap.

"Slow down a little and let him pass," I said hoarsely.

Helen eased down to thirty-five miles an hour, but the cop hung back.

"What is he up to?" I said, trying to control my rising panic.

"He's probably on patrol."

She sounded as calm as an evangelist at a tea party.

"He'll recognize the car. We've got to lose him," I said. "We turn off about a mile ahead of us. He mustn't see us do it. Pull up! Let him get ahead."

"We can't pull up. He might ask us what we are stopping for and get a good look at you."

"We've got to lose him! Don't you realize this is the exact spot where we're supposed to run into the ambush? If we go another half-mile, we're sunk!"

She looked into the driving mirror.

"He's coming up now," she said and slowed the car slightly.

The beam of the motor-cycle lamp shone in our wing mirror. Then the cop drew alongside us. I sank further down into my seat as he went by.

"He looked at you," Helen said softly. "He must know the car."

The cop was pulling ahead now. Suddenly, as if he remembered an appointment, he opened up the throttle and the gleam of his tail lamp disappeared into the darkness.

"He'll remember us," I said and looked back over my shoulder at the straight empty road. "This is the spot where the kidnappers' car is supposed to overtake us. He'll remember there was no traffic on the road."

"So what do we do?"

Her voice was sharp; she sounded as if she were getting jittery.

"We've got to alter the story. You'll have to tell them the kidnappers drove out of the road from the forestry station and blocked the highway, forcing you to stop. That'll fix it."

"Yes."

"Don't forget: they drove suddenly out of the concealed road that leads to the forestry station and you had to pull up fast to prevent a pile up. You've got that?"

"Yes."

"Look – there's the turning. Slow down."

I looked over my shoulder. There was no sign of any headlights behind us. We were having some luck after all.

"Okay, now turn off."

She swung the Rolls on to the dirt road. I leaned forward to cut the headlights and to turn on the spot lamp.

A five-minute drive brought us to the barbed-wire gate. She pulled up and I got out, opened the gate and waved her through. Then I shut the gate, and walked beside the slow-moving car, directing her to one of the huts. She pulled up outside the hut, turned off the spot lamp and got out.

Up on this hill it was dark and still and as quiet as a graveyard. I felt the cool breeze against my sweating face. My heart was thumping and I was feeling slightly sick.

From my pocket I took a small flashlight and went to the door of the hut. I pushed against it, but it was locked.

"Wait here," I said, and moving to the first window, I broke a pane with the butt of the flash lamp, reached inside and slipped back the catch. I pushed open the window, and climbed through into a small room equipped with a desk, a filing cabinet and a chair. I went out into a passage, listened for a moment, then went down to the entrance door. It took me only a few minutes to undo the screws that held the lock and to take the lock off, then I opened the door.

"Come on in," I said.

Helen followed me down the passage to a door at the far end

I pushed open the door and sent the beam of my flashlight into the darkness. I could see the room was big. There was a table in the middle of the room and four or five wooden crates stacked against a wall.

"This'll do," I said. "We'd better not put on the light. It might be seen from the highway."

Helen stood near me, looking around the room. I could hear her light, quick breathing.

Around one of the crates was a thin cord. I took out my pen-knife, cut the cord from it, and cut two short lengths. I put the flashlight on the top of a crate, turning the beam on to Helen. She was watching me. Her face was tense and pale, but she didn't look scared.

"You'll be okay," I said. "The staff will be here early. You won't have more than six hours to wait before you're found. You know the story. You'll be so shaken and hysterical they won't get much from you. They're certain to call the cops."

"I know what we planned," Helen said curtly. "I'm not scared."

I laid the two lengths of cord on the table. My heart was slamming against my ribs.

"This is it. There'll be no turning back now. Once they find you, we're in it up to our necks. Do you still want to go ahead?"

She looked at me.

"Do *you* still want to go ahead?"

Did I? I hesitated. I thought of all that money. I thought of going to Rome with Marian.

"Yes."

"Then don't waste time."

She crossed her wrists and held them out towards me. I hadn't warned her what I was about to do. That was a small bit of the plan she didn't know about. I didn't want to do it, but I knew I had to. The setup just had to look convincing.

I moved a little to one side as if I were going to pick up the cords on the table. Then I balled my right fist, set myself and slammed a punch at her jaw.

The light was bad and I was flustered. Instead of hitting her where I intended to hit her, my fist thudded against her cheek-bone, just below her right eye. She went down as if she were pole-axed, but I hadn't knocked her out as I had intended to do. She gave a thin, strangled scream as she rolled over on the dusty floor. Her white hat fell off, her skirts rode up above her knees.

I felt sweat running down my back and my breath was coming out of my mouth like the hiss of steam.

"You devil!" she screamed at me.

Down there on the floor she was in the full light of the flash beam. As she got up on hands and knees, her lips drawn off her teeth, she looked as vicious as a wild cat.

I don't think I have ever been more rattled. She looked as if she were going to kill me.

I waited until she was rising, then I stepped in, chopped her hands down with my left and hung a right-hand punch on the side of her jaw, hitting her with all my weight behind the punch.

Her head snapped back and she crashed against the leg of the table, sending the table skidding against the wall. She lay on her side, her legs sprawled, her arms above her head.

I stood over her, panting, my heart hammering so violently I could scarcely breathe. Then I bent over her, hooked my fingers in the neck of her frock and ripped it down to her waist. I rolled her over on her face, pulled her arms behind her and roped her wrists. All this time I kept on my gloves and it wasn't easy tying the knots, but I didn't take the gloves off. I roped her ankles, then going over to her handbag, I took out the silk scarf I had told her to bring with her and tied it tightly over her mouth.

She was breathing heavily, her eyes shut, the muscles in her face slack. She looked convincing all right. Already an ugly red patch was showing below her right eye. There was another bruise on her jaw. Her ripped dress was crumpled and dusty. In her fall she had torn the knees out of her nylon stockings. I took off one of her shoes.

That completed the picture. It would be a damned suspicious cop who would imagine that it was she who had engineered the kidnapping of her husband. She looked as I wanted her to look: a woman who had been handled by a couple of vicious thugs.

I emptied the contents of her purse on the floor. She had about thirty dollars in small bills and I put them in my pocket leaving the rest of the stuff.

Time was moving. I didn't like leaving her there to come to in the dark, but I had to. Although I had hit her harder than I had intended, I didn't think she would remain out for more than a few minutes.

I took the flashlight and went quickly out of the room, closing the door behind me. I went down the passage, pulled the entrance door shut and hurried over to the Rolls. I put the camel-

"There's certain to be some damned newspaper man who'll pick it up."

"You must call them! You just can't do nothing!"

"Well, all right. It certainly looks bad."

I went over to the telephone, dialled police headquarters and waited while the connection was made. I was aware of a cold, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. This was it. There was no turning back now. Once the cops were in, they would stay in to the end.

A hard voice that sounded like a handful of gravel being tossed against a concrete wall barked in my ear: "Police headquarters. What is it?"

I thought from now on I was going to hear voices like that: suspicious, barking voices that would probe and yell at me. From now on I was in the middle of it. There was no backing out now: no change of mind. It would be me against a bunch of hard-eyed, gritty-voiced policemen and as a make-weight, there would be Maddux.

Taking a deep, long breath, I began to talk.

and my skin turning clammy. Then I walked over to it an lifted the receiver.

"Glyn?"

I recognized Marian's voice.

"Yes. I was just coming over."

"I'm worried. Mrs. Dester hasn't come back."

"I know. I dozed off, then woke up and went down to see if the Rolls was in the garage. I'm coming over." I hung up, took another shot of Scotch, then leaving the apartment, I went over to the house.

I found Marian in a dressing-gown waiting for me in the lounge.

"Do you think there's been an accident?"

"I shouldn't think so. She's probably staying the night at the sanatorium."

"But she said she would be back to-night."

"She *may* have changed her mind."

Marian moved restlessly about the room. I tried to appear casual, and I crossed over to the bar for a cigarette.

"Don't you think you should call the sanatorium, Glyn? Something may have happened to Mr. Dester. He was pretty shaky."

"You saw him then?"

My heart was thudding again. I was careful not to look at her as I lit my cigarette.

"Yes, I saw him. Please call the sanatorium. I have a feeling something's wrong."

"Okay."

I put the call through. I got the night supervisor who told ne that although they were expecting Dester, he hadn't shown ıp. I thanked him and replaced the receiver.

"They haven't arrived?" Marian asked, alarm in her eyes.

"No. It looks as if they've either had a breakdown or an acciɛnt."

"What are you going to do?"

"This is tricky. I don't know what to do. Dester's supposed be in New York. If it gets out he is going into a sanatorium, creditors will move in. He owes thousands."

"But you must tell the police. They may know something."

'We should have heard if they had."

'They may be lying somewhere on the road. You must call police, Glyn."

with a hatchet face and intent staring eyes.

"Lieutenant Bromwich," the fat detective said, stabbing himself in the chest with his thumb. "Sergeant Lewis." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the younger man. "Who are you?"

"I'm Glyn Nash." I found my voice was a little husky. "I'm Mr. Dester's major-domo."

Bromwich screwed up his eyes. "Major – who?"

"I look after Mr. Dester's affairs, drive his car, help him dress: that sort of thing."

Bromwich gave me a suspicious stare, then walked past me into the lounge. Lewis remained in the hall. I followed Bromwich, who sat down in a lounging chair, pushed his pork-pie hat to the back of his head and stared around the room, a little grimace on his red face.

"How the rich live," he said as if speaking to himself. He pulled out a notebook, thumbed it to a blank page, produced a stub of pencil and then stared at me. "Let's have it. What

# CHAPTER TEN

DESTER may have been a drunk and he may have been washed up in the movie business, but I quickly discovered that he was still an important figure in the eyes of the police.

I expected the desk sergeant, when I told him Dester and his wife had been missing for a couple of hours, would promise to inquire around at the hospitals and check the accident detail and let me know if he heard anything, but he shook me by saying he would send someone out to the house right away.

"You'd better get dressed," I said to Marian. "We're going to have visitors. There's no news of an accident. It beats me what's happened to them."

Looking worried and a little scared, Marian left the lounge. I turned up Edwin Burnett's number in the telephone book and called his house. I got him out of bed after a long delay and told him the news. He seemed pretty startled.

"You say the police are coming over?"

"That's right. I thought maybe you'd want to be here."

But he hedged. It was just after three o'clock, and I guessed he didn't want to make the trip at that time in the morning.

"You can handle it, can't you, Nash? Give me a call at ten o'clock at my office and let me know what's happening." He gave me the number. "It may be they have only had a breakdown. If the Press get on to you, don't tell them anything."

"That's easier said than done, Mr. Burnett," I said.

"I know, but we've got to be careful not to embarrass Mrs. Dester."

I suddenly heard the faint note of an approaching siren. The sound chilled me.

"I think the police are arriving now. I'll call you at ten," I said and hung up.

I crossed the hall and opened the front door just as the police car pulled up.

Two men got out, both in plain clothes. They came up the steps, and I stood aside to let them in.

One of them was a short, fat man with reddish hair, a fiery complexion and a mass of freckles. At a guess he was nudging forty-five or so. He had pale blue eyes that looked like blobs of frozen water. The other detective was taller, younger and dark,

with a hatchet face and intent staring eyes.

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"How the rich live," he said as if speaking to himself. He pulled out a notebook, thumbed it to a blank page, produced a stub of pencil and then stared at me. "Let's have it. What time did they leave?"

I told him; then I went on to tell him where they were going, how I happened to be out and got back just after they had gone, how I had to return to the Buick to fix it, how I had come back and waited for Mrs. Dester to return. I explained that I had dozed off and didn't waken until Marian telephoned me. Then as soon as I realized the time and that Mrs. Dester hadn't come back and that Dester hadn't arrived at the sanatorium, I had called the police.

Bromwich sat listening, his face blank. He made no attempt to write anything in his notebook.

"Where's the girl?" he asked when I had finished.

"You mean Miss Temple?"

"That's who I mean."

"She'll be down in a moment. She's getting dressed." He crossed one fat leg over the other.

"This guy Dester's supposed to be in New York, isn't he? I read somewhere he's now in television or something."

I explained about that. I said I had no idea how the rumour started, but Dester was pretty ill and as far as I knew he wasn't going into television.

"He's a drunk, isn't he?" Bromwich asked.

"That's how you could describe him."

"How is he off financially?"

"He owes money."

"Much?"
I hesitated.
"Come on, come on," Bromwich said. "You don't have to be coy with me."
"Around twenty thousand."
Bromwich made a face.
"These rich . . ." He let it hang, then went on, "Did they take any luggage?"
"Mr. Dester had a suit-case."
"I've seen that Rolls. That's worth something."
"I guess so."
"Mrs. Dester take anything with her?"
I very nearly walked into that one.
"I don't know. I know Mr. Dester took a case with him because I packed it."
Just then Marian came in.
Bromwich screwed his bullet head around and stared at her.
"This is Miss Temple," I said. "This is Lieutenant Bromwich," I went on to Marian.
Bromwich waved Marian to a chair. He didn't bother to get up.
"Did Mrs. Dester take any luggage with her?" he asked.
Marian looked startled. "Why, no. Mr. Dester had a suit-case, but Mrs. Dester . . ."
"Okay, okay, just answer the questions."
He got her to describe exactly what had happened when she saw Helen and me leave the house. It was a little eerie to hear her account of the departure.
"Mrs. Dester seemed to be having trouble with him," Marian said. "He knocked something over and there was a smash. He seemed very unsteady. He wanted the light in the hall turned off because it hurt his eyes. He came down the stairs very slowly, holding on to her arm."
"What was he wearing?" Bromwich asked in a bored, flat voice.
"A dark brown, wide-brimmed hat, a camel-haired, belted coat, dark grey trousers and nigger brown reverse calf shoes," Marian said promptly.
Bromwich looked up. "Are you sure?"
"Yes."
"You've got pretty good eyes, haven't you?"
"I was curious. I hadn't seen him before. He took some time to cross the hall."

"How long have you been here?"

"Exactly a week."

"And this was the first time you set eyes on him?"

"Yes."

I felt my hands go clammy. Was she going to say she didn't think he had been in the room all that time?

"So he stayed in his room for a week?"

"Mr. Dester stayed in bed," I put in. "He was pretty bad, and he slept most of the time."

Bromwich swivelled his bullet head and stared at me.

"Who was his doctor?"

I felt my heart give a little kick, but I managed to keep my face expressionless. A doctor was something Helen and I had overlooked.

"He refused to have a doctor."

"Who suggested he should go to a sanatorium?"

"Mrs. Dester. He was glad to agree."

Bromwich turned back to Marian.

"So for a whole week you didn't see Dester? The first time you saw him was when he was leaving for the sanatorium – right?"

"Yes."

He brooded for a moment that seemed like an hour to me, then asked how Mrs. Dester was dressed. This time he made notes.

"Did they have any ready cash in the house?" he asked me when he had finished writing.

"Not more than a couple of hundred dollars."

"Know what Dester's bank account is worth?"

"About three or four thousand."

"Mrs. Dester own an account?"

"Not to my knowledge."

He scratched the side of his face while he stared blankly in front of him. Then he looked over at Marian and came out with a fast one that jolted me.

"Would you say from what you saw of him walking to the car that he was a sick man or would you say he was faking?"

Marian looked startled.

"He – he was very shaky. He looked as if he had been in bed some time and was unsteady on his legs."

"Yeah, but that'd be easy to fake. How did he look?"

"I didn't see his face. His hat was pulled down and his collar was turned up."

I felt a trickle of sweat run down the side of my neck, but I didn't dare wipe it away.

"Hey, Lewis . . ." Bromwich called, raising his voice.

The other detective came to the door.

"Take him up to Dester's room," Bromwich said to Marian. "Let him see Mrs. Dester's room also." He looked at Lewis. "Check to see what clothes they've got, personal stuff. I want to know if they've skipped."

Lewis nodded and followed Marian up the stairs.

Bromwich turned to me.

"There's been no accident reported for the past eight hours," he said, "so that rules out a smash. If they had had a breakdown, we should have heard by now. It looks to me that as he can't pay his debts, he has skipped."

"I can't see him doing that," I said. "He was pretty ill. Besides, he's well known. He couldn't go to any place and remain long without being recognized."

"She might have persuaded him," Bromwich said. "If they haven't skipped, then why have they disappeared? Any ideas?"

I wasn't going to walk into that kind of trap.

"I thought they must have met with an accident."

"Well, they haven't. Any more ideas?"

"No, unless he was taken ill on the road and they've stopped somewhere not on the telephone."

He gave me a long stare of disgust and shrugged his fat shoulders. We sat for a few minutes in silence, then we heard Lewis and Marian coming downstairs. Bromwich heaved himself out of his chair and walked into the hall.

Lewis shook his head.

"Doesn't seem to be anything missing. She has a stack of clothes and jewellery up there. They certainly haven't packed and run."

Bromwich scratched his nose. He didn't look convinced.

"Well, okay. I'll notify all patrols to look out for them," he said to me. "If I hear anything I'll call on you. If you hear anything you call me – right?"

As he moved to the front door, he paused and looked at Marian and then at me.

"Do you sleep in this joint?"

"I have an apartment over the garage."

Again he looked at Marian, then he shrugged his shoulders, jerked his head at Lewis and went down the steps to the car.

I didn't have to be a mind reader to know what had been

going through his mind. It had been a smart move of mine to have moved back to the garage apartment. These cops were for ever looking for the sex angle.

I didn't sleep much for the rest of the night. Not wanting to listen to Marian's theories, I had told her to go back to bed. I had gone over to the garage apartment where I lay on the bed and dozed. I did finally drift off into a light sleep towards seven o'clock and woke with a start at a few minutes after half past eight. I swung my legs off the bed and went into the bathroom to take a shower. I was surprised that I hadn't already heard from Bromwich that Helen had been found. The staff of a forestry station starts work early and Helen was bound to have been found by now.

Was the fat detective suspicious of me? Was he checking Helen's story before seeing me?

I felt pretty jittery and my hands were unsteady as I dressed. There was no backing out now, I told myself. I tried to assure myself that the prize of three-quarters of a million was worth the tension and the wait. In a couple of months, I told myself, all this would be behind me and I would be heading for Rome with Marian.

Suddenly the telephone bell rang. Here it is, I thought, my heart beginning to pound. But it was only Marian telling me she had made coffee and did I want any?

"I'll be right over," I said, and hung up.

By the time I got over to the house it was just after nine. I didn't want the coffee Marian had ready, but I forced myself to drink it.

"Hadn't you better call the police and find out if they have any news?" Marian asked after a while.

We had been discussing endlessly it seemed to me what could have happened to the Desters without getting anywhere, and the time was now twenty minutes to ten. I kept asking myself why they hadn't been through to tell me Helen had been found. It was as much as I could do to remain still. Had Helen's nerve cracked and had she given herself away already and me too?

"Yes, I guess I'd better. I promised to call Mr. Burnett at ten."

I went over to the telephone, got through to police headquarters and asked for Lieutenant Bromwich. I was told he was out and Sergeant Lewis was with him.

"Is there anyone who can tell me if there is any news of Mr. and Mrs. Dester?"

The sergeant who had answered the telephone said he hadn't any information to give me. Lieutenant Bromwich would get into touch with me when he returned.

Maybe they were out at the forestry station now, I thought as I hung up. Now I thought about it I decided Helen would have been found around eight o'clock. There would be some kind of delay before the police were notified. Then Bromwich and Lewis would have to get out there. They would probably arrive around half past nine. They had to listen to Helen's story. They would want to check it. I couldn't expect to hear anything much before eleven o'clock.

"No one knows anything," I said to Marian. "Bromwich is out. He'll call when he gets back."

"Do you think they have been kidnapped?" Marian asked suddenly. "It's possible, isn't it?"

That jolted me. I wanted the police to learn of the kidnapping through Helen and no one else. Then I remembered they were probably hearing Helen's story right at this minute and I relaxed.

"Could be, but we mustn't jump to conclusions. It's a job for the police. Now look, will you carry on just as if Mrs. Dester is still here? I've got to call Burnett."

"I don't want to stay here, Glyn," Marian said. "There's an atmosphere in this house that scares me. I don't like being alone here."

"I can understand that, but you can't leave yet. The police will want to talk to you again. Mrs. Dester may want your help. You will wait until they are found, won't you? I tell you what we'll do. I'll move into your room and you take over mine. You won't mind being in the garage apartment alone, will you?"

"I'd prefer it."

"Okay. Well, you pack your stuff and I'll take it over. You can help me move my stuff. You start now while I call Burnett."

I wanted to get her out of the lounge. Talking to her was a strain while I had so much on my mind. When she had gone I called Burnett and told him there was no news. He said he would get in touch with the Chief of Police who was a friend of his and get some action.

"Has the Press been on to you yet?"

"Not yet."

"If they do, refer them to me. I'll handle them."

That was a weight off my mind. I said I'd do it and hung up.

As I was moving to the stairs to warn Marian not to talk to the Press if they arrived, I heard a car pull up and I went to the front door.

Bromwich and Lewis were getting out.

I felt my mouth turn dry. Why hadn't they brought Helen with them? Had they arrested her? Somehow I kept my face expressionless; somehow I forced myself to stand still and not to give way to the impulse to turn and bolt out of the house.

They came up the steps. Bromwich looked tired, as if he had been up all night. He nodded to me, then walked into the lounge and sat down. Lewis remained out in the hall.

"This is a puzzler," Bromwich said, stretching out his short, thick legs as he stared up at me. "These two are playing some sort of game and I'll be damned if I know what it is."

"What do you mean?" My voice sounded off-key.

"We've found the Rolls. It was ditched in West 9th Street. He's taken the suit-case. There's no sign of them."

*There's no sign of them!*

That must mean the staff at the forestry station hadn't reported finding Helen. I crossed over to the bar for the cigarette-box, not wanting him to see my face. Could it be possible that the hut I had left Helen in wasn't often used? Was she still lying on the floor, bound hand and foot, waiting for someone to find her? I felt sweat start out on my face at the thought. It wasn't likely. There were offices in the hut. She had only to bang on the floor with her feet to attract attention. Had she lost her nerve and asked whoever found her not to call the police? If that was the case, then where was she?

"They were seen by a State trooper around half past ten," Bromwich went on, "on Highway 101, heading towards the sanatorium. He passed the car which was travelling slowly. He saw Mrs. Dester at the wheel and Dester beside her. For some reason, they must have turned around and come back to Hollywood, ditched the car and made off. It looks to me as if they are running out on their debts."

I heard myself say, "But Dester was a sick man. He couldn't have walked far. If he had taken a bus or a train, he would have been noticed."

"We're checking the bus stations and trains now," Bromwich said. He took out a cigar and lit it. "I'm wondering how sick this guy was. Did you visit him when he was in bed?"

"Why, yes. That is I looked in from time to time. He was usually asleep."

Bromwich looked sharply at me, frowned and shifted his position in the chair.

"Well, he could have faked he was worse than he was if he was planning a run-out."

"Miss Temple suggested just now that they have been kidnapped," I said. I knew it was dangerous to bring this up. It would have been safer to wait until they found Helen, but all this talk about Dester running away from his creditors had to be checked.

Bromwich screwed up his eyes.

"Kidnapped? What makes her think that?"

"Well, they have both disappeared . . ."

"There's no ransom note."

I could see he didn't like this idea. He got to his feet and began to pace up and down.

"Edwin Burnett, the attorney who acts for Mr. Dester, is having a word with the Chief of Police," I said. "He's calling for action."

Bromwich stopped short as if he had walked into a brick wall. "Having a word with the Chief?"

"Yes. Apparently he's a friend of his."

"Sweet grief! So it's going to be one of those cases! Look, tell that girl to keep her mouth shut about kidnapping. If the Press get hold of that idea . . ." He broke off, snapping his fingers. "My luck that Burnett's a friend of the Chief's. I'm going to get run ragged. I can see that." He started to pace up and down again. Then he paused to look at me, "Has Dester any relations or friends he would visit?"

"He has no relations. I don't know about his friends."

"That could be it, you know. He might have changed his mind about going to the sanatorium . . ." Then he stopped short and cursed under his breath. "No. There's the car. Why the hell did he ditch the car?" He turned and began to pace up and down again. "Yeah, this could be a snatch. The car points to it. I'd better report to the Chief before he yells for me."

He went out of the lounge, jerking his head at Lewis as he passed him. Together they hurried down to the car and drove off.

I went over to the bar and gave myself a Scotch. Where was Helen? What had happened to her? The whole of our plan depended on her. I thought of Dester lying in the deep-freeze. If

Helen didn't show up soon I would have the job of getting him out of the cabinet on my own. The thought turned me sick.

I had just finished my drink and was mixing myself another when two newspaper men arrived. I had trouble getting rid of them. They didn't seem to be interested in talking to Burnett. They wanted first-hand information from me, but I wouldn't let them in the house, telling them my instructions were to refer all inquiries to Burnett. They went off finally. They hadn't been gone ten minutes before four others turned up complete with a Press photographer. I got rid of them after a struggle, but not before the photographer had taken my photograph.

By this time it was after twelve, and there was still no news of Helen. I was by now fit to walk up a wall, and when Marián came down to ask me to carry her suit-cases over to the garage apartment it was as much as I could do to be civil to her.

She offered to get me lunch, but I said I had to go out. I took the Buick and headed out towards Highway 101, but I didn't get far. I realized that if I were seen, it would be a complete give away. I had to let the police find Helen. I didn't dare look for her myself. I drove over to Burnett's office in the hope of getting some news from him, but I was told he was in court.

I returned to the house. There was still no news of Helen. There could now be three explanations for her silence: the police were holding her, waiting for me to make a wrong move; she hadn't been found yet, or she had lost her nerve, got free and bolted, leaving me to hold the bag.

I decided I had to go out to the forestry station after dark. I had to find out if she was still there.

The evening newspapers carried the story of Dester's disappearance under a banner headline.

There was a photograph of me talking to the reporters on the front page of the *Hollywood Monitor*. The caption under the photograph read: *Glyn Nash, Erle Dester's secretary, holds off reporters in their attempt to learn the truth of Dester's disappearance.*

There was no mention of Dester's debts. The Chief of Police, in an interview with the Press, said that it looked as if Dester had been kidnapped although no ransom note had as yet been received. He said that he was organizing an intensive search for the missing couple.

And yet even with all this publicity, there was still no news of Helen.

Around seven o'clock, Burnett telephoned.

"We're coming out to the house at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, Nash," he told me. "It looks as if they have been kidnapped, and we'll want to talk to you and Miss Temple. I shall want to go through Mr. Dester's papers. You might have everything ready for me. If you have a list of what he owes . . ."

I said I would have everything ready for him.

"There's no news then?" I asked.

"Nothing. It's extraordinary. Stay by the telephone, Nash. You may get a ransom call. Notify the police and myself if you do."

I said I would and hung up. But I knew there would be no ransom call. I had to go out to the forestry station, but first I had to get rid of Marian.

We sat in the lounge listening to the radio and talking in a desultory fashion until just after ten. How I contained myself I'll never know, but at half past ten I suggested she should go to bed.

"I'm out of cigarettes," I said. "I'll take the car and get a pack at the end of the road. I won't be long."

"I don't want to be a nuisance, Glyn," she said, "but I do hate being alone here. Suppose the kidnappers ring up?"

"Okay, I won't go then," I said. "I've got enough to last me until to-morrow morning. I'll see you over to the garage apartment. Then I'll turn in myself. I'm pretty well whacked after no sleep last night. I expect you can do with some sleep yourself."

We went over to the garage apartment.

"I shall leave to-morrow, Glyn," Marian said as we entered the sitting-room. "I can't stay here any longer. I'll get a job somewhere and find a room."

"Burnett will be coming to-morrow morning. We'll talk to him. I don't want to stay myself," I said. "You'll be all right here for to-night. Don't run out on me, Marian."

She smiled. "No, but I hate it here. There's such a horrible atmosphere . . ."

"Let's talk about it to-morrow."

I kissed her and then went down the stairs, through the garage and out on to the driveway. Fortunately I hadn't put the Buick away. The drive from the garage was steeply sloped. I opened the car door, slid under the driving wheel and released the parking brake. The car rolled down the drive. It kept going to the

gates, then, knowing Marian wouldn't now be able to hear the engine start up, I switched on the ignition.

I knew what I was doing was dangerous. I could be walking right into a trap. If Helen had been arrested, it was possible the police were waiting for me at the forestry station. If they caught me there, they wouldn't need any other evidence to tie me in with Helen. But I had to take the risk.

Suppose she had skipped? I asked myself. What was I going to do? Skip myself? The only other alternative would be to give the police the whole story, show them where Dester was and put as much blame on to Helen as I could.

I pushed that thought hastily out of my mind. That must be the last alternative. I wished now I hadn't been so damned smart. I wished I had never thought up this crazy plan. I cursed myself for going back with Dester to his house on the night we first met.

As I drove along Highway 101 I kept my eyes open for the sight of any State trooper, but I didn't see one.

I slowed down when I was a quarter of a mile from the dirt road that led to the forestry station. Ahead of me was a lay-by. I pulled into it, turned off the car's lights and cut the engine. I didn't intend to drive up that dirt road in case the police were waiting for me. I would sneak up there on foot, giving them no warning of my approach. With any luck I might spot them if they were there and duck out of sight before they saw me.

I reached the opening to the road after six or seven minutes. There was no moon; only stars, and it wasn't easy to see where I was going. I moved as silently as I could, not hurrying. I kept to the centre of the road, my ears and eyes alert.

It took me a little over a quarter of an hour to reach the barbed-wire gate. I could just make out the outlines of the gate in the semi-darkness. It stood open, the way I had left it when I had driven away the previous night.

I stood still, staring at the gate. Did that mean anything? Did it mean no one had been here since last night? Or was this a smart move of the police to lull me into walking into their trap?

My heart was beating violently as I stood listening, staring beyond the gate at the dim outlines of the three huts. There was no sign of life, no light showed, and the only sound I could hear was the thumping of my heart.

I moved forward cautiously, and finally reached the hut where I had left Helen. I paused outside the door, listening, then very

gently I put my hand on the door and pushed. It moved and swung open.

Why hadn't the lock been repaired? It was just as I had left it. Could this mean no one had been to the hut or was this again a smart move of the police who were waiting for me somewhere in the darkness beyond?

I had to see. I couldn't run away now, although I wanted I took out my flashlight and thumbed down the switch. T' bright beam lit up the passage. The doors on either side of the passage were shut. I moved forward, making no sound, listening, my heart pounding. Slowly, I crept down the passage to the door leading into the room where I had left Helen. The door stood ajar.

I couldn't remember if I had left it like that or if I had closed it.

Were the police in there, waiting for me?

I couldn't nerve myself to push open the door. I stood, staring at it, the beam of my flashlight lighting up the panels.

In a croaking whisper I said, "Is anyone there?"

The silence that came out of the room was like a physical thing: worse even than the sound of a voice.

I took another step forward, reached out a shaking hand, and touched the door panel. The door swung open with a little squeak that set my teeth on edge.

I sent the beam of the flashlight into the room, along the floor to where I had left Helen.

The beam picked up the pale green of her skirt and her long, slender legs in their torn nylon stockings.

I stood staring at her, scarcely believing my eyes. I could see the cord still around her ankles. I moved forward, cold and shaking. The light moved up her body to her face. The silk scarf was still tightly bound around her mouth. Her eyes were half open, and they looked sightlessly into the beam of the light.

She looked shrunken and like a doll. The dreadful grey, waxy texture of her skin told me she was dead.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

How long I stood staring down at her, I shall never know. It was only when I heard a car coming up the dirt road and saw the reflection of its headlights through the window that I was galvanized into action. I lurched to the window and looked out.

The car was coming through the gateway. The red glow on the hood told me it was a police car.

For perhaps three or four seconds I stood rooted, staring out of the window, staring at the approaching car, and when finally it sank into my paralysed mind that in a moment they would be in here and would catch me red-handed, it was too late to escape by the front entrance.

Feverishly I tried to raise the window, but it had jammed and my efforts made no impression on it. I heard the entrance door open. I was now trapped in this room. In seconds they would come in and find me.

I looked wildly around for a hiding place. Right by me were the four big, wooden crates. Dropping down on hands and knees I eased one of them from the wall. I was lucky. This one was empty and without a lid. I turned it on its side with the open end towards the wall and I slid into it. There was just room for me to squat down. It wasn't much of a hiding place, but there was just the chance they wouldn't expect anyone to be hiding here and wouldn't search the room.

I heard a man's voice say, "Stay with the car, Jackson. Come on, let's have a look at this joint."

My heart contracted as I recognized Bromwich's voice.

I heard him walk into the passage, turn a door handle and walk into the office I had entered when I had first come here.

Lewis's voice said sharply, "See that ... the window's broken."

"Doesn't mean anything," Bromwich said curtly. "This place has been up for sale now for a month. The news gets around. Probably some bum broke in to see what he could pick up."

"There was someone out here last night," Lewis said. "Car lights were seen from the highway. This could be where they were brought after they were snatched, Lieutenant. They were heading this way when MacTavish passed them."

Bromwich grunted. "Nothing in here."

I heard them come out and cross the passage into the room on the right. I was suspended in a cold, terrified vacuum. If they found me here, they would think I had killed her and they'd send me to the gas chamber.

"I guess we're wasting our time," Bromwich said from the other room. "I still think they've skipped. Ditching the car could be his idea of throwing us off his trail. While we're working on this kidnapping idea, he's probably on a ship for Europe."

"The Chief doesn't think so," Lewis said.

"He looks for trouble," Bromwich said sourly, "but he doesn't have to run himself ragged like I do. I'd think it was a snatch myself if all I had to do was to sit behind a desk and hand out cockeyed orders.

"We may as well check this last room," Lewis said.

I held my breath as I heard the door push open. The beam of a powerful flashlight swung into the room. I closed my eyes, squeezing myself against the wall of the crate.

"For sweet Pete's sake!" Bromwich exclaimed.

I heard him move forward.

"It's the Dester woman!" Lewis said. His voice sounded excited. "The description fits her. Is she cold?"

"Been dead thirty hours at least," Bromwich said. "My stars! This is going to start something."

"So they were snatched," Lewis said. "Think Dester's body is anywhere around?"

"How the hell should I know?" Bromwich snapped. "I've got to get the boys up here. Let's see if the telephone in the other room's still connected. You stay here."

I heard him run down the passage while Lewis lit a cigarette and began to prowl around the room. He paused beside the wooden crates and gave one of them a tentative kick. I remained motionless, sweating, my breath held, my heart hammering.

I could hear Bromwich bawling on the telephone. I couldn't hear what he was saying. In about an hour, probably less, the whole forestry station would be crawling with police. If I were going to get away I had to do it before they arrived.

Lewis must have tried the light switch for the room suddenly sprang alight.

"Well, at least the light's not disconnected, Lieutenant," he called.

About five minutes later, Bromwich came back into the room.

"They're on their way. Tell Jackson to take a look at the

other two huts. Dester may be in one of them."

Lewis went away. I could hear Bromwich moving about the room. He hummed under his breath. I couldn't see what he was doing, but every time he passed close to the crates, I held my breath.

"He's taking a look," Lewis said, coming back into the room. I heard him move over to where Helen lay. "She's certainly been knocked about. Think she was suffocated by that gag?"

"I dunno. The M.O. will tell us." Bromwich sat on the crate in which I was hiding. "It beats me why she was left tied up like that. She must have been alive. They wouldn't tie up a dead woman, would they? But why did they leave her here? This isn't like a snatch job to leave her here. There's something wrong in this setup, Lewis."

"Yeah," Lewis said. "It looks to me it's the work of an amateur. You know that guy Nash bothers me. There's something too smooth about him. Think he's hooked up in this?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out. You're right; there is something about him. One time he worked for Jack Solly. We had Solly in a couple of times and we couldn't pin anything on him: remember? Birds of a feather –"

"That's what I was thinking. He was too glib about how sick Dester was. It's my bet Dester never was sick."

I was listening to all this and I was pretty scared.

"She may have had something to do with it too," Bromwich went on. "That cord around her wrists and ankles doesn't fit. It looks like a plant to me."

"All the same, you don't fake that bruise she's got there."

"That's right."

Footsteps sounded in the passage, then a new voice said, "I've checked the other two huts. No one's in there and no one's been in there for some time, Lieutenant."

"Okay, Jackson. Stick around outside and let me know when the others come."

There was a long silence, then Bromwich said, "I've got another idea: one I like a lot. Suppose Dester killed her and tied her this way to make it look like a kidnapping? He could have skipped, hoping we would think he's in the hands of kidnappers. How do you like that?"

"Why should he kill her?" Lewis asked doubtfully.

"They didn't hit it off. From what I hear she treated him like a dog. They may have quarrelled on the way to the sanatorium. It was her idea he should go there. Maybe he felt she was

railroading him into the joint and he wouldn't be able to get once he was in. Maybe he got her to stop the car and slugged her, brought her out here, found he had killed her and rigged it to look like she had been kidnapped. That could be it, Lewis."

"Then he drove back to Hollywood, ditched the car and took a train or a bus somewhere," Lewis said. "I think you've got something there, Lieutenant."

"I'm damned sure I have." Bromwich slid off the crate. "I'll have a word with the Chief now. You might take a look at those other two huts in case Jackson has missed anything. He's not as bright as he could be."

I heard the two men walk down the passage. A moment later I heard the telephone bell tinkle as Bromwich started to dial.

It was now or never. I crawled out of the crate, stepped silently to the half-open door and peered into the passage.

The office door from which Bromwich was telephoning stood half open. I should have to pass it to get to the front entrance. Was the policeman outside or had he gone with Lewis? I heard Bromwich say, "We've found Mrs. Dester, Chief. Yeah: she's out at Newmark's forestry station. She's dead. Yeah, it looks like murder..."

I crept down the passage, my heart pounding. If Lewis came back now he would walk right into me. I paused outside the office door, holding my breath.

Bromwich was saying, "The boys are on their way here. I'll know more after the M.O.'s seen her. Yeah, she's been dead at least thirty hours..."

I inched forward and peered into the office. Bromwich was leaning across the desk, his hat back half turned to me. I didn't hesitate. Two quick steps took me past the door to the front entrance. Again I paused while I looked out into the dark night. I could see the police car; its headlights cutting a path in the darkness, but I couldn't see Jackson or Lewis. I heard the telephone bell tinkle as Bromwich hung up. I hadn't a moment. Drawing in a deep breath, I slid out into the darkness. Pressing my back against the wall of the hut I began to move cautiously away from the police car.

I heard a sound, and looking to my right, I saw Bromwich come to the door and stare across the open space in front of the hut, down towards the highway.

I kept moving until I reached the end of the wall. Looking around it, I could see nothing except darkness. I felt the cool

breeze on my face. I could hear Lewis talking somewhere away from me.

I left the shelter of the hut and, crouching low, I began to move in a wide circle towards the barbed-wire gate. I couldn't see where I was going and I had to test each step as I made it to be sure I shouldn't blunder into a tree or step on a dry stick or make some sound that would give me away. But as I got farther away from the hut, I took more chances and moved faster. Even at that it took me ten minutes to reach the gate.

I paused to look back.

There was no sign of either Bromwich or Lewis, but I caught sight of Jackson as he lolled against the doorway leading into the hut.

I turned and started down the dirt road, moving cautiously at first, then as I got farther away, I broke into a run. I was reaching the end of the road when I heard the approaching sirens. Without hesitation I plunged into a clump of bushes and spread out flat on my face.

Two or three minutes later, three police cars swung on to the dirt road and went tearing up the hill towards the forestry station. I let them get on well ahead, then, scrambling to my feet, I ran as hard as I could back to the Buick.

It wasn't until I was back in Dester's big, silent house and in the room that Marian had used before moving over to my apartment that the full impact of what Helen's death meant hit me.

Too much had happened immediately after finding her to give my mind a chance to do more than accept the stunning fact that she was dead, but now, as I sat in a lounging chair, dry-mouthed, my heart still pounding, I realized that in some way I had caused her death.

I remembered in my panic I had hit her far harder than I intended to, but surely a blow on the jaw couldn't have killed her? It worried me that there had been no congestion of her face to point that she had been suffocated. The police couldn't charge me with murder if I had left her alive and she had died later because of the gag. The best they could do would be to try to pin a manslaughter rap on me, but if I had killed her with my fist, then they could charge me with murder.

I cursed myself for ever starting this thing. There was now no question of ever getting hold of the three-quarters of a million. I was in a hell of a jam. Below, in the kitchen, was Dester's body. Very soon the house and its contents would be valued to

meet the creditors' demands, and then the deep-freeze cabinet was certain to be inspected. I had to move his body somewhere before that happened.

If I could plant his body somewhere without being seen, was I safe? I asked myself. From what I had heard, Bromwich was already suspicious of me, but could he prove anything? Had I left any clue in the hut that would give me away? The greatest thing in my favour was that I had no motive for killing Dester or Helen.

What would happen if the police found Dester's body if I were lucky enough to be able to dump it somewhere? Would they think the kidnappers had lost their nerve, and after accidentally killing Helen, had shot Dester?

Bromwich had seemed to think that Dester had murdered Helen. Suddenly I saw how I could save myself, providing I had a little luck.

If I could get Dester out of the deep-freeze cabinet and take his body somewhere, get his gun that I had lodged in the safe deposit and put it in his hand, wouldn't it be possible that Bromwich would think that after killing Helen, Dester had had a fit of remorse and had killed himself?

After all Dester had actually shot himself. I had only to put the gun in his hand to turn the clock back. I got to my feet and began to pace up and down while I thought about this idea. The police couldn't prove that Dester had died more than a week ago. They would think he died when I got him out of the freezer. That part of the original scheme still stood.

The advantage of this new scheme was that I need not take Dester's body out of the grounds. I could carry his body into a quiet part of the garden and dump him there with his gun in his hand. When he was found the police would think he had returned to the house to get the gun. I could tell them that I knew he kept a gun in his desk drawer. I could even leave a half-finished confession note in the typewriter.

The more I thought about this idea the more I was convinced that it would let me out. Marian wasn't in the house any longer. I would be free to get him out of the cabinet whenever I was ready.

But she would have to hear the sound of the shot when he was supposed to kill himself. That was essential. I wanted the police to find him quickly. If he had any spare cartridges the hearing of the shot would present no difficulties. When I had set the stage, all I had to do was to fire a shot into the air, take

out the shell case, put a new cartridge into the gun and the gun into his hand, then run back to the house. By the time Marian called me up to know what the shot meant I should be back.

I went at once to Dester's room to hunt for a box of cartridges. After a five-minute feverish search, I found the box tucked under a pile of shirts. I took a cartridge from the box and put it in my pocket.

There was nothing I could do this night. First I had to get the gun from the safe deposit. I would get it in the morning, then I would stage the suicide the same night. That meant I would have to turn off the motor of the deep-freeze cabinet some time during the morning. By midnight, Dester's body would be almost back to normal and I would be able to handle him. The thought of taking him out and carrying him into the garden scared me, but I had to do it. I couldn't risk letting the police investigate me. I had to lead them away from myself and fix their attention on Dester.

It was getting on for two o'clock by the time I went to bed. My mind was a lot easier. If I could only pull this off I was out in the open again, and I could get away from this house and put the whole nightmare business behind me.

It had taught me a lesson, I told myself. No more quick-rich schemes. I'd get back to my advertising work. I didn't have to work for Solly. I could get a job with some other firm. I'd work at it this time. Then when Marian came back from Rome we'd get married.

I was so sold on the feeling that I was going to get myself out of this jam that I drifted off into a dreamless sleep, and it wasn't until Marian disturbed me by moving about downstairs that I woke up around nine o'clock.

When I had shaved, showered and dressed I came downstairs. She had put a tray of coffee, soft-boiled eggs and toast on the terrace and we had breakfast together.

"At eleven o'clock Burnett's coming over," I said. "I'd be glad if you would help me. I've got to list Dester's debts and put his papers in order."

Up to now she hadn't said anything about leaving. If I was to stage this scheme of mine to-night, it was essential that she should be here. I had to have a reliable and independent witness to the hearing of the shot.

After we had washed up the dishes, we went into Dester's study and Marian and I started in to work. We ransacked all the desk drawers and piled the papers we found there on the

desk. Then we went through them, Marian calling out the amounts of the bills while I noted them down. We had been doing this for over a half an hour when suddenly she stopped. I looked up to see she was staring at a long envelope with a heavy seal on the back of it.

"What have you got there?" I asked sharply.

"It was among all these bills."

She passed it to me.

I looked at it and read the inscription.

*For the attention of Mr. Edwin Burnett. Erle Dester's Last Will and Testament. June 6th 1955.*

I stared at it for a long moment. For no reason at all that I could think of this slim envelope made me uneasy. I wanted to open it, but with Marian watching me, I knew I couldn't do that.

I laid it down. "I'll give it to him. From the look of things, Dester hadn't much to leave."

My voice sounded odd in my ears. It must have sounded odd to Marian for she looked quickly at me.

"Let's get on. These guys will be here in half an hour."

We were still at it when Burnett's car arrived. I had by then some idea of what Dester owed. As far as I could judge it was around twenty-seven thousand. His assets were two thousand in the bank, the house, the two cars and the contents of the house. With any luck and with a good auctioneer, it should be possible to raise the money to pay off his creditors.

As Burnett was getting out of his car, another car came up the drive: this time a police car.

Marian and I stood in the open doorway while Burnett turned to meet the occupants of the other car. From it got a big, beefy man with a purple complexion and close-set, hard eyes, Lieutenant Bromwich and Sergeant Lewis and another man who immediately held my attention.

This man had the shoulders of a prize fighter and the legs of a midget. He wasn't more than five feet six in height. His thinning grey hair was unruly, and his face, that reminded me of one of those rubber dolls you can squeeze into all shapes and sizes, was as bleak and as hard as a Siberian winter. He wore his well-cut clothes carelessly. His shirt collar was rumpled, his tie hung askew, but I could see he was the important member of the party. Even the big, purple-faced man, who I guessed was Chief of Police Madvig, stood back to allow him to be the first to be greeted by Burnett.

The five men stood talking for a brief moment, then they came up the steps.

I watched them, aware that my heart was thumping and my hands were cold and clammy.

Burnett said to the short-legged man, "I don't think you have met Glyn Nash. He is Dester's secretary."

I found myself looking into a pair of slate grey eyes. I felt my right hand squeezed in a grip that cracked my bones.

"Nash, I want you to meet Mr. Maddux of the National Fidelity Insurance Company," Burnett said.

As I looked into those slate grey, wintery eyes I remembered what Dester had said about this man: *He has a big reputation in the insurance world. He is smart, tough and extremely efficient. It is said of him that he knows instinctively when a claim is a fake or not. He has been with the National Fidelity for fifteen years, and during that time he has sent a large number of people to jail, and eighteen people to the death cell.*

And that was what he looked like: a force to be reckoned with.

Madvig, Burnett and Bromwich drifted into the hall at the heels of Maddux. As usual Lewis stayed behind. They seemed uncertain what was going to happen whereas Maddux gave the impression that he knew exactly what he was about to do.

"I haven't a lot of time," he said. His voice matched his face. "Let's get around a table and talk."

I took them into the lounge. There wasn't a table, but that didn't seem to worry Maddux. He took up a position before the empty fireplace: a position that dominated the room while Burnett, Madvig, and Bromwich almost apologetically took lounging chairs that faced Maddux.

Marian and I stood in the doorway.

"Come in, you two," Maddux said and waved us to two chairs slightly away from where the other three were sitting. "We'll need your help."

As soon as we had sat down, Maddux turned to Madvig.

"I don't know any facts except what I've read in the newspapers," he said. "Dester, as you know, is one of my clients. He is insured with us for seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and that's quite a piece of money. As far as my company is concerned, he is a highly valuable liability. I'd like to get the facts straight. Will one of you put me in the picture?"

Madvig nodded over to Bromwich who cleared his throat and sat forward on the edge of his chair.

"We were notified by Mr. Nash on the night of June 25th that

both Dester and his wife were missing. She was taking him to Belle View sanatorium out at Santa Barbara. They didn't there. They were seen around half past eleven on Highway 1 by a State trooper, then they vanished."

"Why was he going to the sanatorium?" Maddux asked.

"He was a sick man: an alcoholic," Burnett said. "I with Mrs. Dester. She told me he was having hallucinati and was being violent. She persuaded him to go into the torium. Mr. Nash here looked after him. They got on well together and he could handle him."

Maddux looked at me. His eyes seemed to bore right through to the back of my head.

"Was Dester violent?"

I hadn't spent most of the night pacing the floor for nothing. If they were to be made to think Dester had killed Helen, I had to supply the motive.

"No, he wasn't violent," I said. "He seemed pretty ill to me: almost as if he were drugged."

That got a reaction from Bromwich.

"You didn't tell me that," he said aggressively.

"I told you he slept most of the time."

"That's not the same thing."

"Did Dester want to go to the sanatorium?" Maddux broke in impatiently.

"Yes. Mrs. Dester said he was glad she had arranged for him to go," Burnett said.

"I'm asking Nash. Never mind what Mrs. Dester said," Maddux snapped.

"I don't know," I said. "Whenever I went into his room he was either asleep or in a kind of coma. I never mentioned the sanatorium to him."

Maddux lifted his shoulders. He nodded at Bromwich.

"Go on," he said, and took a pipe out of his pocket and began to fill it from a much-worn leather pouch.

"I thought as Dester owed a whale of a lot of money..." Bromwich began when Maddux interrupted.

"How much money?"

Burnett looked at me.

"I haven't had time to complete a statement," I said, "but at a rough guess it would be around twenty-seven thousand, but it's probably more than that."

"I thought at first he had skipped," Bromwich went on. "

"Were you supposed to be watching him?"

"Mrs. Dester asked me to be ready in case she needed with him. She asked me to keep out of sight as Mr. Dester sensitive."

"Did he need help?"

"No."

Maddux turned to Bromwich. "Go ahead."

It was obvious that Bromwich didn't like all these tions. His fiery face was taking on a deeper shade.

"We had a report from a motorist that he had seen the lights of a car out at Newmark's forestry station. It wasn't until the motorist had read of Dester's disappearance that he thought of reporting what he had seen. Newmark's station has been up for sale these past five weeks and the motorist happened to know no one was working there. I went up there and found Mrs. Dester. She was dead."

I leaned forward to tap off the ash of my cigarette, partly turning my face so they couldn't see it. I felt I was losing colour.

"A window of one of the huts had been broken; the lock on the door had been removed. She was in one of the rooms, tie hand and foot and gagged. She had been dead about twenty-si hours. I reckon she died within an hour after the State troope had seen her on the highway."

Maddux asked the question I had been waiting for.

"Was she murdered?"

"I guess so," Bromwich said. "She had received a very violent blow on the jaw and she had taken a heavy fall, landing or the back of her head. The spinal cord at the base of the skul was fractured by the blow and the fall completed the fatal injuries. The M.O. says she must have died soon after receiving the blow."

I was ice cold now. Only by the frantic instinct for self-preservation did I manage to keep my face expressionless.

"Whoever hit her obviously didn't know he had killed her," Bromwich went on importantly, "or he wouldn't have tied her up like that."

"If he were smart," Maddux said quietly, "that's just what he would do so he could plead to a manslaughter rap if he were caught."

"Yeah, sure," Bromwich said uneasily. He looked across at Madvig, who gave him a cold stare from his close-set eyes. "I had thought of that too."

"Any clues?" Maddux asked.

"Not a thing. No finger-prints. The gag was a scarf that belonged to her. The ropes came from a crate in the room."

Maddux began to pace up and down before the fireplace.

"And no sign of Dester?"

"We're still hunting for him. He can't get away."

"What makes you think he's in a position to get away?"

Madvig spoke for the first time.

"We're working on the theory that Dester murdered his wife."

Maddux paused. He looked at Madvig, then at Bromwich, then at me. It was as much as I could do to meet the hard, staring eyes. Then he looked at Burnett.

"Do you think Dester would murder his wife?"

"Dester was an alcoholic. He might do anything," Burnett said curtly.

"We know Mrs. Dester and he didn't get on together," Madvig put in. "Something went wrong early in their marriage. They had ceased to live together as man and wife for some time. It's been said that Dester took to drink because of this. He was irresponsible. He ran up big debts. I can understand why she wanted him under control. We think Dester realized that once he was in the sanatorium he wouldn't get out for some time. We think he lost his head, tried to persuade Mrs. Dester not to take him to the sanatorium and when she insisted, he hit and killed her. Then he took her to the forestry station, tied her so it looked as if she had been handled by kidnappers and has himself gone into hiding in the hope we'll think he is in the hands of the kidnappers. I wouldn't be surprised if we don't receive a ransom note from him."

Maddux moved slowly over to me and stood in front of me. "And you, Mr. Nash, do you think Dester would murder his wife?"

"I don't know," I said through stiff lips. "He could be pretty quick tempered when he was drinking. He might certainly have hit her if she refused to do what he wanted. It could have been an accident."

Well, at least, I had got the accident theory into the setup. But Bromwich wouldn't stand for it.

"It was no accident," he said. "No guy hits a woman that hard unless he meant to finish her."

I felt suddenly sick. If they ever got me, they would never believe I hadn't meant to kill her.

Maddux moved away.

"Did Mrs. Dester know Dester was insured?" he asked.

"Not until I told her," Burnett said. "Nash will bear that out. He was with us when she asked me if he was insured."

"She didn't know then?"

"She asked me."

"Did you tell her the amount of coverage?"

"I didn't know myself until you told me."

"What did she say when you told her he was insured?"

"She hoped he would borrow on the policy to pay his debts. When I reminded her that if he died after borrowing on the policy, there might be nothing left for her, she said she couldn't possibly take the insurance money if it would help him when he was alive. I thought it did her a great deal of credit."

Maddux looked at him, then he laughed. The hard, barking sound of his laugh shocked us. Burnett flushed angrily.

"I can't see there is anything to laugh at . . ."

"I can," Maddux said. He pointed the stem of his pipe at Burnett. "If you think Helen Dester didn't know her husband was insured for seven hundred and fifty thousand you have another think coming. She knew, and I'll tell you why. She had been already involved in an insurance fraud. I make a practice to keep tabs on anyone who has been mixed up in any shady insurance racket even if that someone hasn't had anything to do with my company. I keep a record of everyone who has made a doubtful claim because you never know if that someone will try something smart with us. I've kept tabs on Helen Dester for a long time. I know her background, and I know what made her tick. Fourteen months ago, she was the mistress of a guy named Van Tomlin. He insured himself in her favour for twenty thousand dollars. Not long after, when he was in her apartment, he fell out of the window. The insurance company wasn't much, but at least they did threaten to fight her claim, but in the end they compromised and she collected seven thousand instead of twenty thousand. I don't have to tell you if her claim had been on the level she would have taken the company to court, but she didn't because she pushed Van Tomlin out of the window and the insurance company knew it!"

There was a short, electric silence. I was thinking: thank God we weren't able to go ahead with the crack-brained idea of mine. I could see now it would never have worked; not when we would have been up against this guy.

"Are you telling me that Mrs. Dester was a murderess?" Burnett asked in a stifled voice.

Maddux showed his small white teeth in a grin.

"That's what I'm telling you: and I'll tell you something else. Three years ago when she was twenty-four, she was a companion to an old lady who was stupid enough to leave Mrs. Dester five thousand dollars in her will and even more stupid to tell her what she had done. Two months later, the old lady fell downstairs and broke her neck."

Madvig turned on Bromwich and glowered at him.

"Why the hell didn't you find this out?" he snarled.

"I'm looking for Dester," Bromwich said, his usual red face now purple. "I haven't got around to Mrs. Dester yet."

Madvig snorted, then turned to Maddux.

"Well, she didn't kill Dester, did she?"

"How do you know? Where is Dester? How do you know he isn't dead? How do you know she didn't plan to kill him, fake a kidnapping, and collect the insurance money?"

"Are you telling me she tied herself up, punched herself in the jaw and broke her goddamn neck?" Madvig exclaimed, sitting forward, his purple face congested.

Maddux fetched out a box of matches and relit his pipe. His movements were deliberate. I felt my heart suddenly slow down. An icy chill crept up my spine. Something was coming. I could see that. I found I was clenching my fists and sitting forward as Madvig was sitting forward.

"No, she didn't do that," Maddux said. There was a cold, hard expression on his face that made everyone in the room stare at him. "But before you pin her death on Dester, you'd better start digging around for the other man." He paused, looking at Madvig. "For you can bet your last buck there is another man."

# CHAPTER TWELVE

IT was lucky for me that both Madvig and Bromwich resented Maddux's intrusion into the case. I didn't realize this at the time, but subsequent facts were to prove that they were hostile not only to him, but to his ideas.

Madvig said, "Oh, I don't know, Mr. Maddux. We don't want to make this case too complicated. As I see it, Dester killed her. That's a straightforward theory. They drive away, she is found dead and he has disappeared. It looks a cinch to me. It's happened thousands of times before, and it will happen thousands of times in the future."

Maddux stared at him for a long, uncomfortable moment, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay. It's not my business to tell you how to run this investigation, but remember what I said when you find Dester's dead body: look for the other man."

"What makes you think Dester is dead?" Madvig asked sharply.

"When a guy is insured for three-quarters of a million and he comes to me to ask me to delete the self-destruction clause in his policy with a lame story that he doesn't want to be tempted to do away with himself, I know there's trouble coming. When I know he is married to a gold-digging murderess I know from which direction the trouble will come. When I hear he's suddenly disappeared and she's been found dead in mysterious circumstances I know a smart idea to defraud my company has been tried and has turned sour. We must find him."

"We'll do that," Madvig said, his purple face turning a deeper shade.

"And another thing: who inherits what's left of his estate now his wife is dead?" Maddux went on. "Did he leave a will?"

Something nudged me into life. Call it a hunch if you like, but I had a sudden feeling that no one must see the will that Marian found until I had had the chance of examining it. For all I knew Dester might just possibly have left me something, and if he had, I would be right out on a limb. So far, there was no motive that could be put down in black and white for me to

have murdered him, but a mention in the will would supply the motive.

"I don't know," Burnett was saying. "I don't think he made a will." He looked over at me. "You haven't come across a will, have you, Nash?"

"Not yet, but I have still a lot of papers to go through," I said. I looked across at Marian, met her surprised eyes and frowned at her. I did this quickly, and then looked back at Burnett. He didn't seem to have noticed my signal. "If I find anything I'll let you know at once."

"Has he any relations?" Maddux asked.

"No, nor has Mrs. Dester."

Maddux scratched the side of his jaw.

"I'd like to know who would benefit if my company had to pay the claim." He showed his white teeth in a grim smile. "I may say this: we won't pay out unless we are absolutely convinced there has been no attempt at fraud. All the same, I'd like to know who we have to deal with."

"If Nash finds the will, I'll let you know," Burnett said.

"Okay. Well, now I've got to get back to San Francisco. I'll be down again." He turned to Madvig. "Until Dester is found, alive or dead, I want someone in this house. I can either send one of my own investigators or you can use one of your men. I want this house watched day and night until Dester is found. Will you fix it or shall I?"

That was nearly the finisher as far as I was concerned. How was I to move Dester's body if there was a policeman guarding the house?

"Surely that's not necessary," Madvig said, frowning. "You said just now you were convinced Dester is dead . . ."

"I want to make certain his ghost doesn't walk," Maddux said with a hard little grin.

"Sergeant Lewis can stay," Bromwich said.

Madvig shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes. He's right here now. There's no point in using one of your men."

"That's fine," Maddux said and knocked out his pipe. "If you find either Dester or his will, let me know at once." He turned to me. "What's your position here, Mr. Nash?"

"I've been paid to the end of the month," I said. "I'm at Mr. Burnett's disposal until then."

"I don't want to stay," Marian broke in.

Maddux looked at her, then at Burnett, who said, "Couldn't

you stay on for a few days, Miss Temple? We shall need you at the inquest. The house will have to be looked after. Naturally I'll see you get paid. I would be glad if you would stay."

Marian hesitated. "Very well, I'll stay until the end of the week, but not after."

"Thank you. We shall probably have news of Dester by then."

Maddux, Madvig and Bromwich had gone out into the hall. I could hear Madvig talking to Lewis.

Burnett went on, "Well, as I'm here, I may as well look at Mr. Dester's papers. I haven't much time. Have you got them ready for me?"

"I was going to parcel them up and send them down to you," I said. "At the moment they are in rather a mess. If you could give me until to-morrow morning I'll have them all ready for you."

He hesitated, then nodded. "Do that. I can get one of my clerks to go through them."

Nodding to Marian and then to me, he went out and joined the other three as they stood by the police car talking.

Marian came up to me. "Glyn, why didn't you . . .?"

I whipped my hand over her mouth, cutting her words off.

"Lewis is out there," I breathed. "Don't say anything." Then raising my voice, I went on, "Let's get back to the study. We have a lot of work to get through."

Pale, her eyes alarmed, Marian let me lead her into the hall.

Lewis was prowling around at the foot of the stairs, his hands in his trousers pockets, his thin, hard face scowling.

We went past him without saying anything, down the passage and into Dester's study. I shut the door and locked it.

"Glyn! What is happening? Why didn't you tell them we had found the will?"

"I wanted to look at it first," I said, moving away from the door and over to the desk. "I had to look at it first."

"But why? You can't do that. It's addressed to Mr. Burnett."

I pushed aside the heap of bills and found the long envelope. Then I sat down, holding it in my hand.

"I can put it in another envelope. Burnett's not to know it's sealed. I've got to look at it first."

She came and stood opposite me, her hands resting on the desk, her eyes scared.

"But why, Glyn? Is there something wrong?"

"Not yet. You heard what Maddux said about the other man?

If I'm named in this will, he may jump to the conclusion that I am the other man."

She stared at me, her eyes opening wide.

"I could be in trouble, Marian, if I don't handle this setup carefully. You may as well know the truth. For a very short time, Helen and I were lovers."

Marian turned away and, crossing the room, she sat down. "I guessed that, Glyn."

"Yes. Maddux may guess it too. If Dester is found dead he may think I killed him if I'm named in this will."

"Of course he won't, Glyn! How can you say such a thing?"

"Oh, yes, he will. It's a formula the police work to: husband who is insured for a lot of money suddenly dies. The wife has a lover. The wife dies. The lover is found to come into money left by the husband. Q.E.D. The lover has killed the husband and probably the wife. It has happened and will go on happening. All they want now is to find a motive."

"But the police don't work like that, Glyn. They work on clues . . ." she began, then stopped as I took out my penknife and slit open the envelope.

"They haven't any clues," I said as I pulled a single sheet of paper out of the envelope, "and I'm going to take good care they don't have a motive to pin on me."

I read the short document. As I read the wording I felt myself turn first hot, then cold. I went so cold it was as if I was standing in the way of a raging arctic wind.

It was a straightforward, simple testament. It said that as I had saved his life, I was to receive any money left over from the estate after the creditors had been paid. In the event of Helen's death, and if the National Fidelity paid the insurance money into the estate, the whole amount should come to me.

Marian said sharply, "Glyn! What is it?"

I tossed the will across to her.

"Read it," I said, my voice shaking. "The crazy, drunken fool has left me everything!"

The laugh was on me.

If I hadn't been such a smart alec and if I hadn't tried to horn in on the insurance money, it seemed now that I would have had a chance of getting the money anyway. I was sure Helen would have come unstuck against Maddux. If I had kept to the side lines and not interfered and let her get rid of Dester on her own, she would probably have landed herself in the death

cell, and the money would have automatically come to me. B
I had to be smart. I had manoeuvred myself into a position now where I dared not show Burnett this will. It would put me right under the spot-light. They would not only hang Helen's death on me, but they would go flat out to hang Dester's death on me too. In the state I was in, I knew I would never face up to police examination.

I did my best to explain to Marian that I didn't want the money, and so long as there was a mystery attached to Dester's death, it would be asking for trouble to let anyone see the will.

"I'll keep it for the time being," I said. "If Dester turns up, I'll give it back to him and ask him to destroy it. I don't want the money. If he isn't alive, then I'll destroy it myself. I've got to keep out of this, kid. You can see that, can't you?"

"But surely, Glyn, if Mr. Dester wanted you to have the money . . ." She stopped abruptly and looked at me. "You didn't have anything to do with his disappearance?"

"You see," I said, "the idea suddenly drops into your mind that I might have. Can you imagine how Maddux would react?"

"That doesn't answer my question," Marian said sharply. "I wouldn't ask you if you weren't acting so strangely, and you are acting strangely, Glyn."

"I don't know what has happened to Dester and I have had nothing to do with his disappearance," I said, forcing myself to meet her eyes. "I admit I have a guilty conscience. Helen and I were lovers. I acted like a fool, and it could get me into trouble with the police. Surely you can see that?"

"Just because you were lovers . . ."

"Now look, don't let's waste time. I know what I am doing." I was losing patience. "I'm going to put the will in my bank for the time being. I'm going to do it right now. Will you continue to list these bills? I won't be long."

"Are you quite sure you know what you are doing, Glyn?"

I got up and went over to her and took her in my arms.

"I'm not doing anything wrong. I don't want his money and I don't want Maddux to know he has left me the money. Don't worry and don't tell anyone you know about it."

I kissed her, and then unlocking the study door, I went out into the hall.

There was no sign of Lewis. I stood hesitating, thinking of the deep-freeze cabinet. Suppose Lewis got inquisitive and looked inside? Somehow I had to get Dester's body out of the house to-night. I had no idea how I was going to do it with Lewis

prowling around, but I had to do it.

I went down the passage and into the kitchen, but it was empty. I looked at the bottles on top of the deep-freeze cabinet. They were in place. I crossed over to the cabinet and turned off the switch. The motor gave a little rumble and stopped. I stood for a long moment, my hand resting on the lid of the cabinet. The body in the cabinet would be completely thawed out by to-night. Even with the body in a relaxed state, I knew it was going to be a hell of a job to get it out of the cabinet without help.

I pushed the thought out of my mind, and leaving the kitchen, I hurried over to the garage, got into the Buick and drove to my bank where I picked up the safe key. I then drove over to the safe deposit company. I opened the safe, took out Dester's gun, being careful to drop a handkerchief over it before touching it. I put it in my hip pocket. Then I put the will on top of Dester's suicide note, shut and locked the safe.

By the time I got back to the house, it was just after one o'clock. Marian had laid lunch for three out on the terrace. I went into the kitchen where I found her preparing lunch.

"The motor's stopped running in the freezer," she said as I came in. "Is that all right?"

"Yes. We're not likely to use it now so I turned it off."

I heard a sound behind me and looking over my shoulder I saw Sergeant Lewis. He was looking beyond me at the deep-freeze cabinet and he walked past me and stood before it.

"I've always wanted one of these things," he said. "This is a pretty big one, isn't it?"

My heart was pounding as I walked over and joined him.

"You can get smaller ones," I said. "The Desters scarcely ever used this monster."

"It certainly is big," Lewis said. He shifted his glance to stare at the bottles. "He carried quite a stock of whisky. Funny place to keep them."

"I put them there. He had them in his closet."

"If they sell up here, maybe I could get that cabinet cheap," Lewis said. "What's inside? Is it fitted with trays and racks?"

"It has two long trays," I said, and I had to make an effort to keep my voice steady. "I don't think you'd get it cheap. One of the hotels is bound to bid for it."

"Yeah, I guess that's right."

He stared at the cabinet for a long moment, then shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Marian said lunch was ready, and we helped carry t[illegible]

out on to the terrace. After a good meal and under the influence of the warm sunshine, Lewis appeared to relax.

"This guy Maddux," he said, "may be a ball of fire as a claims assessor, but he certainly has some crummy ideas when it comes to an investigation. It sticks out a mile that Dester knocked his wife off. You can see that, can't you?" He looked over at me.

"I think he lost his head and hit her too hard," I said carefully. "I don't think he intended to kill her."

"Whether he intended to or not, he killed her, and that's murder." He tilted his basket chair back. "I wonder where he is now. It's my bet he's in Mexico or someplace where we won't think of looking for him."

"You don't think he will come back here then?" Marian asked.

"Is it likely? Why should he want to come back here? He must know the house will be watched. He'll get as far away from Hollywood as he can. It's his only hope." He glanced over at me. "Did you find a will?"

"No."

"This guy Maddux is looking for trouble," Lewis said, shrugging his shoulders. "Anyway, why should I care? I've got a nice soft job for the moment."

"That reminds me: if you want to take a nap this afternoon," I said, "I'd better show you your room."

"What the hell do I want to take a nap for?"

"I thought you were going to be up all night."

He laughed. "In case Dester comes back? Not a chance. I haven't had a decent sleep since this case broke. I'm not going to miss the chance now Bromwich can't call me out in the middle of the night to hold his hand."

I pushed back my chair. "Well, I guess I'd better get to work. Mr. Burnett wants Dester's papers to-morrow morning and there's still a lot to do."

For the first time since I heard Lewis was going to stay in the house, I lost my sick feeling of fear. If he wasn't going to prowl around the house, I had a chance of getting Dester's body into the garden. It would be risky, but I had to take the risk.

Lewis said to Marian, "I'll help you with the dishes. My wife says I'm the best dish washer in the district."

I went into Dester's study, shut the door and sat down. I took the gun from my hip pocket and put it in the top desk drawer. Then I slipped on a pair of gloves I had by me, took a sheet of notepaper from the rack and fed it into the typewriter.

I took off the gloves and sat for a moment thinking. Then I typed the following:

*I've come back for the gun. This is my finish. I didn't mean to hit her so hard. I thought I might get away with it, but I now know I can't. Anyway I don't want to live any longer. I'm taking the easy way out. There's no future left for me . . .*

I studied the note for a moment, then putting on the gloves again I took the sheet of paper out of the machine and put it under a stack of typing paper in the top drawer.

I looked at the clock. It was just after half past two. In ten hours or so, if I had any luck, I would be free of the whole nightmare thing.

Marian and I didn't get Dester's papers parcelled up until past eight o'clock. We had come across another drawer of bills just when we thought we had finished and that held us up.

After I had struck a grand total, I said, "Well, I don't think there will be much left: he now owes close on fifty thousand."

"Do you think if anything happens to him that the insurance company will pay up?" Marian asked.

"I don't know. It depends what has happened to him. Anyway, I don't care one way or the other. I don't want the money." I got to my feet. "Well, I guess you don't have to hang on any longer unless you want to, kid. Why don't you go to a movie or something?"

She shook her head.

"I don't feel like it. Do you want to go?"

The thought of staying in this house waiting for Lewis to go to bed wasn't a pleasant one, but I dared not leave the house. Lewis had shown a mild interest in the freezer. There was just a chance that, left on his own, he might take the bottles off the top and look inside.

"Let's go into the lounge. Maybe there's something to watch on television."

Lewis was watching the fights when we entered the lounge.

"These are pretty rotten," he said, glancing over his shoulder at us. "If you two want some other programme, it's okay with me."

Marian said she didn't want to watch.

"I'm going over to my room," she said. "I have some letters to write."

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"I'll come over with you," I said.

We walked across to the garage in the fading light and paused at the entrance.

"I'll get back," I said. "I want an early night. All this commotion has made me tired."

"You don't think anything will happen to-night, Glyn?"

"I'm sure it won't. Forget it, kid. Dester's miles away by now. In another few days you can quit."

"I shall be glad to go."

I bent and kissed her. "I'll see you in the morning."

I hurried back to the house. Lewis was lolling in his chair, staring at a couple of bruisers being careful not to hurt each other. "These two puffs have been waltzing around the ring now for ten minutes. They haven't laid a glove on each other yet."

I looked at my strap watch. It was getting on for nine. I had still at least four hours to kill before I could start on the last leg of this nightmare. I sat down, lit a cigarette and watched the screen.

After five more dreary minutes had ticked by, the referee stopped the fight and called it a no contest.

"About time too," Lewis said. "Anyway, they won't get paid."

Another couple climbed into the ring and another slow, unexciting fight started. After a while I noticed Lewis had fallen asleep.

I looked at him. His thin face hadn't relaxed in sleep: it looked as if it had been carved out of stone. I didn't dare do anything yet. I began to check off in my mind the points I had to remember. I had everything ready. First I would have to remove the bottles from the top of the deep-freeze cabinet, then I had to get him out of the cabinet, take him into the garden, and then fire off the gun.

It was only then that I realized with a sudden sick shock that I wouldn't be able to get back into the house before Lewis came down to investigate the sound of the shot.

I couldn't take the risk of him spotting me in the garden. He might look out of his window and see me coming back to the house or he might rush down and meet me as I was entering the house.

I sat staring at the bright television screen, fighting against my rising panic. How was I to get around this snag? It took me several minutes to accept the fact that I dared not take Dester out into the garden. Then it dawned on me that I had been making things more difficult for myself. Dester had originally

shot himself in his study. The safest thing for me to do was to set the stage exactly as it had been and stage the suicide once more in his study. I could fire the gun through the open window. The fact that the window was open would point to the way Dester had entered the study. I began to breathe again. It was better this way. As soon as I had fired the shot I would cross the passage into the kitchen, wait until Lewis had gone into the study, then I'd leave the kitchen, creep half-way up the stairs, turn and run down noisily as if I had just come from my room.

In theory it sounded fine, but I flinched from the reality of carrying it out. I dreaded opening the freezer and seeing him again, but I had to do it.

Around half past ten Lewis abruptly woke up. I had been watching him and when I saw him stir, I closed my eyes and pretended I had also fallen asleep.

"Sweet grief! Those puffs are still waltzing together," he said in disgust as he sat up.

I stirred and opened my eyes. "Well, they sent us to sleep: what more do you want?" I turned off the set. "I guess I'm going up to bed."

"Yeah," Lewis returned and stretched. "I've been wasting time. I should have been in bed long ago." He got to his feet. "Do you lock up here?"

"Sure," I said. "It won't take me long. You go on up."

"I guess I'll come around with you. I wouldn't want a burglar to break in while I'm snoring upstairs. I'd get ribbed for the rest of my days."

He followed me into the hall and watched me lock and bolt the front door, then he came after me, down the passage into the kitchen and watched me fasten the kitchen door.

"That's it," I said. "Now let's get upstairs."

He pulled aside the kitchen curtains.

"This window's not locked," he said and slid the catch. "Let's have a look at the rest of the windows."

I could have strangled him, but there was nothing to do but to follow him into the dining-room, the lounge and finally into Dester's room. He had checked and found the windows of the lounge and dining-room were locked. He pushed open the door leading into Dester's study, snapped on the light and crossed the room to the window.

"This isn't locked," he said.

I was staring at the desk, a cold chill creeping up my spine. Like a careless, stupid fool I had left the pair of gloves right

by the typewriter in full view. I took a step forward in the hope I could snatch them up before he turned, but he was already turning and I stopped short.

"Well, that's that," he said. "No one can get in now without breaking a pane."

He moved across the room, not looking at the desk, and stepped into the passage. I turned off the light and followed him out, leaving the door half open.

"Let's go," he said. "If you hear anything, call me, I usually sleep like a dead man."

We went upstairs together and parted at the head of the stairs. He went towards the guest room at the far end of the passage, next door to Helen's room.

"So long," I said. "Sleep well."

He nodded, then went into his bedroom and shut the door. I stood for a moment, listening, then I turned off the hall lights from the two-way switch and then went down the passage to my room.

I walked slowly over to the bed and sat on it.

Had he seen the gloves? That was the kind of stupid slip that could put a man in the death cell. What was I thinking about to have made a mistake like that? Maybe he hadn't seen them. He hadn't remarked on them, but did that mean anything?

I felt sweat on my face as I realized just what kind of a job I had on my hands this night. I had all those bottles to take off the cabinet, and when I had got Dester out of the freezer, I had to put the bottles back again. I had to do that without making the slightest sound. I wasn't kidded by that last remark of Lewis's about sleeping like a dead man.

By checking what he had thought to be all the windows, he had satisfied himself that no one could get in without breaking a window-pane, but he had missed the cloakroom that led off into the hall. That was the way Dester had to come, I told myself. But Lewis had complicated things for me. I had to fire the gun in Dester's study. That meant I had to unlatch the window, open it, fire the gun out of it, close and latch the window again. That would take up most of my escape time. I would have to move like lightning if I were to get out of the room before Lewis reached the head of the stairs where he could see into the hall.

I got to my feet and undressed slowly. I put on pyjamas and a dressing-gown. I had brought the gun up from the study. I checked it, then I took out the empty shell and loaded the live slug in its place. With a handkerchief I wiped over the gun very

arefully, and wrapping the handkerchief around the butt, I put ıe gun in my dressing-gown pocket.

My first move would be to go downstairs into Dester's study ıd get the gloves. I knew I mustn't touch anything until I had ıy hands covered. One finger-print would blow my plan sky igh. I looked at my strap watch. The time was five minutes past even. I couldn't start this thing until after one o'clock. I had be sure that Lewis was heavily asleep. I turned off my bedoom light, then opening the door I looked along the passage Lewis's door. No light showed from under the door. That least showed he was in bed.

I pushed my door to without shutting it and groped my way ıck to the bed and stretched out on it.

I lay in the darkness and waited, and for the first time since was a kid, I prayed.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE clock in the hall chimed the quarter after one o'clock. For the past two hours I had been lying on the bed, sweating it out and listening to the violent rain storm that lashed against the bedroom windows: a storm that had blanketed every other sound in the house. It had lasted half an hour and as quickly had died out. I swung my legs off the bed and sat up. I remained motionless, listening. Only the busy ticking of the bedside clock and the violent thumping of my heart came to me as I sat in the darkness.

I reached out and turned on the bedside lamp. Then I stood up, slid my feet into slippers and moved to my bedroom door to look out into the darkness of the passage. No light showed from Lewis's door. I listened for another long minute, then, satisfied he was asleep, I went over to the chest of drawers and picked up my flashlight. I turned it on and then put out the bedside light.

Moving silently I reached the hall and moved down the passage and into Dester's study. I closed the door, turned on the light and picked up the gloves that were lying on the desk. I put them on. My hands were shaking so badly that I had trouble in getting the confession note from under the pile of typing paper. I nearly stripped off the gloves as I fiddled to pick up the sheet, but stopped myself in time. I fed the sheet of paper into the machine, being careful to line up the last word with the guide line of the machine.

I went over to the window, unlatched it and opened it a few inches.

Turning off the light, I opened the door and stood listening. There was no sound to alarm me, and bracing myself I went silently along the passage, lighting my way with my flashlight, into the kitchen. I shut and locked the door, then I turned on the light and looked across at the deep-freeze cabinet.

I was in a pretty bad state of nerves by then. My heart wa[illegible] beating so violently that I felt suffocated and my gloved [illegible] were shaking. I started to remove the three dozen bottles [illegible] whisky that were piled on top of the cabinet. I was careful [illegible] to let the bottles clash together and I stood them in neat r[illegible] to one side of the cabinet. It was when I was taking the last o[illegible] bottles off that I very nearly ran into disaster. As I picked up

of the bottles, the remaining bottle toppled over and began to roll towards the edge of the cabinet top. I hurriedly set down the two bottles as the third bottle reached the edge, toppled over and fell. Somehow I got my hand under it when it was inches from the floor and held it. I stood for a long moment, sweat on my face and my body trembling, then I set down the bottle and straightened up. It had been a close call.

I crossed over to the door, turned the key and opened the door a few inches and listened.

This was the moment. Once I got him out of the cabinet I would have to hurry. If Lewis came down before I could get Dester into the study and before I could fire the shot, all this agony of nerves, my careful planning, the risk I was taking would be for nothing.

I went back into the kitchen, closed and locked the door again, and then walked over to the cabinet. As I put my hands on the lid to lift it, my nerve failed. I stepped back, wiping the sweat off my face with the sleeve of my dressing-gown. I crossed to a cupboard, opened it and took out a drinking glass. I just couldn't open the cabinet without a shot of whisky. I opened one of the bottles, fumbling at it with my gloved fingers, but I got it open, splashed three inches of whisky into the glass and shot it down my throat. I felt the whisky hit my stomach and felt my nerves tighten under the impact. It did the trick. Although I was tempted to repeat the dose, I resisted the temptation. I put the glass down and, leaving the opened bottle of whisky on the table, I turned back to the cabinet. As I was lifting the lid, I suddenly stiffened. My heart jumped, then raced. *Had I heard something? Had the stairs creaked as if stealthy feet were moving down them?* I lowered the lid hurriedly, walked swiftly to the door, turned off the light, unlocked the door and opened it an inch or so. I listened, holding my breath, trying to hear any sound above the thudding of my heartbeats. I stood there for what must have been five agonizing minutes, but I heard nothing, and finally, convinced my imagination had been playing me tricks, I closed and locked the door again, turned on the light and leaned against the door, trying to control my shaking limbs.

I went back to the cabinet, lifted the lid, and with my breath whistling between my clenched teeth, I looked down at him.

He lay on his side, the wound in his head away from me. He looked quite natural, as if he were asleep. I bent down and touched the side of his neck. He was scarcely cold. There was less moisture in the cabinet than I had thought: most of it had

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been absorbed by his clothes which felt wet to the touch. Thi didn't worry me as it had rained heavily and I thought it woul be a fair risk to assume the police wouldn't be suspicious sinc Dester had no top coat with him.

I caught hold of him under his armpits and heaved upwards He was much heavier than I thought. He came out slowly, an I saw then a small pool of blood on the floor of the cabinet The wound was beginning to bleed again now that the freezin process had worn off.

It took me three or four hellish minutes to get him from th cabinet on to the kitchen floor, and by the time I had done it, was completely bushed. I had to lean against the cabinet whil I fought for my breath. I didn't dare wait too long. He had to bleed in the study: that was essential, otherwise they would knov he hadn't shot himself there.

I crossed over to the kitchen door, unlocked it, opened it an listened, but I heard nothing. I went swiftly along to the study pushed the door wide open and turned on the light. I didn' dare attempt to carry Dester along the passage in the dark. might knock against the wall or make some sound that woul alert Lewis.

I returned to the kitchen, lifted Dester across my shoulder an set off down the passage to the study. My knees sagged unde his dead weight, my breath came in soft, strangled gasps, m heart pounded, sweat blinded me. But I got him into the stud without making any noise, and very carefully I slid him off m shoulder on to the floor by the desk chair. Blood ran from hi wound on to the carpet.

I snatched up the flashlight, and slowly retracing my steps t the kitchen, I examined the carpet carefully to make sure ther were no blood stains to give me away. I found a small one half way down the passage. I knew I was lucky there weren't more I got a wet cloth from the kitchen and rubbed out the stain. Un less the police examined the carpet minutely they wouldn't fin it. Then I returned to the kitchen and, working feverishly, cleaned out the cabinet, making sure that I got rid of every trac of blood. Then I cleaned the kitchen floor, washed out the clot and hid it in a saucepan. I would get rid of it in the morning I told myself. Then I closed the lid of the cabinet and began t put the bottles back into position. I was feeling better now. had more control over my nerves. Three-quarters of the job wa done. I now had to fire the gun out of the window, close th window and get out of the room before Lewis came from hi

He turned swiftly and faced the pantry door.

"Okay, Dester," he said in a low, snarling voice. "Come on out with your hands in the air!"

I didn't move, feeling sweat running down my face.

"Come on! I know you're in there!"

He waited for a few seconds, then suddenly, moving fast, he crossed to the pantry door and kicked it open.

At that moment his back was turned to me. I pulled aside the curtain and tossed the whisky bottle over his head and towards the opposite wall. The bottle fell with a crash on the floor and smashed like a miniature bomb, sending a spray of splinters and whisky over the wall and floor.

Lewis stiffened, staring at the smashed bottle. I was already moving as I threw the bottle. Holding the gun by its barrel, I hit him on the top of his head, driving him down on to his knees. His gun fell out of his hand. He gave a stifled groan, tried to push himself off his knees, but I hit him again. This time I hit him much harder. The jar as the butt slammed down on his head ran up my arm. He stretched out, face down with a sighing groan.

I stepped back. I was shaking, and it was as much as I could do not to flop on the floor at his side.

He hadn't seen me. I was positive of that. How long would he remain out? I caught hold of him under the armpits and dragged him into the pantry, dumped him on the floor, closed and locked the door. Then I went back into Dester's study, moving at a staggering run.

From the bottom of a cupboard near the desk, I took out a small electric fire. I plugged it in and stood the fire near Dester's body. I knew it was vital to accelerate the final thawing-out process, and also to take some of the wet out of his clothes.

I paused to check my dressing-gown and pyjamas, and it was as well that I did. There was a long smear of blood on my pyjama trousers and a big stain on the dressing-gown.

Leaving the study I bolted upstairs, tore off my things and put on a clean pair of pyjamas. I hid the soiled articles between the mattress and the box spring.

I went downstairs again and into the study. Bracing myself, I examined Dester's body closely. The blood from his wound had made by now an impressive little halo around his head. I touched his face. It felt warm. His muscles were relaxed. There was nothing more I could do now. He should have bled more, but with any luck the medical examiner wouldn't notice this. I picked up Des-

ter's gun that I had put on the desk, crossed to the window, pointed the gun upwards and out of the window and pulled the trigger. The crash of gunfire and the blinding flash jarred me and I very nearly dropped the gun. I didn't have a great deal of time now. I laid the gun by Dester's side, shut and latched the window, then ran into the passage and along to the cloakroom. I raised the window and left it half open.

Then I peeled off my gloves, chased upstairs and hid them with my soiled pyjamas and dressing-gown.

As I started down the stairs I heard the telephone bell ringing. That would be Marian, I thought. I went into the study and lifted the receiver.

"Glyn! What's happened?" Her voice was high-pitched and anxious. "Was that a shot?"

"Yes. Stay right where you are. It's Dester. He's shot himself. Now, don't talk. I've got to call the police. Lewis has vanished . . ."

"But, Glyn . . ."

"Get off the line now. I want to phone," and I hung up.

I crossed over to the electric stove, turned it off, disconnected it and put it back in the cupboard. In only a few minutes the police would arrive. This was my last free time to make sure I hadn't left a clue nor made a mistake. I looked around the room carefully. I looked at Dester's body. I checked the confession note. I pushed the gun a little closer to his body with my foot.

I sat in the lounge, a cigarette burning between my fingers, listening absently to the sound of the rain against the windows. Marian was curled up on the settee, dozing. A bull-neck policeman was standing in the doorway, his back to us. The time by the clock on the overmantel was twenty-eight minutes to four.

The rest of the house was swarming with activity. I caught a glimpse of detectives as they crossed the hall either going towards Dester's study or away from it. Two newspaper men were arguing with a police sergeant. They wanted to talk to me, but the police sergeant wouldn't let them into the lounge.

It had been barely four minutes after I had telephoned that a prowl car had pulled up outside the house. Ten minutes later, Bromwich had arrived with a squad of homicide men. In less than five minutes, they had found Lewis.

Bromwich had asked me what had happened. I told him I had heard a shot, come down, found Dester in the study and Lewis missing. That was all I could tell him.

"Okay, sit in the lounge. I'll talk to you later," he said.

First, I went upstairs and put on a coat and a pair of trouser over my pyjamas, then I had come down into the lounge. By that time Marian had been brought over from the garage apartment. After Bromwich had found out she had nothing to tel him except that she had heard the shot, he sent her into th lounge with me.

We hadn't said much to each other. There was nothing w could say with the policeman in the doorway. She had curle up on the settee and closed her eyes.

It was a long wait, and my nerves were crawling. I saw a tall bony man cross the hall and heard the policeman say, "Straigh down the passage on your left, doc."

This bony man was the one who could shatter my plan. longed for a drink, but I didn't dare take one. So I smoked an waited. Around four o'clock an ambulance arrived and I sa Lewis being carried out on a stretcher. It was then that I had sudden terrified feeling that I might have killed him.

"Is the sergeant all right?" I asked the policeman at the door.

He turned and looked at me, his small, hard eyes aggressive.

"Yeah, he's fine. He's only got a cracked skull, but there' nothing else the matter with him."

It was pretty obvious by the way he spoke he had no time fo Lewis. I went on waiting.

At half past four another van arrived. Four men came in carry ing a long, black, coffin-like box. I guessed they would be fror the morgue. Around ten past five, they recrossed the hall, carry ing the box on their shoulders, their knees sagging slightly unde its weight.

After being in the freezer for nearly ten days, Dester was a last going to his grave. I turned my head away, feeling sick, an the dull thump of the coffin as it was shifted from the men' shoulders to the floor of the van, turned me cold.

The first light of dawn was coming through the curtains whe Bromwich came in. He walked with a little swagger, and ther was a cocky expression in his hard eyes.

"You two can go to bed. I'll want you at the inquest. Shoul be in a couple of days. Sorry to have kept you up."

I had hidden my clenched fists in my trousers pockets. A his words my fists relaxed once more into shaking hands. "Aren there any more questions?" I said, trying to make my voic sound steady.

He grinned. "It's all fixed. I told that cluck Maddux how was, but he wouldn't listen. It was as plain as the nose on m

face. Dester didn't want to go into the sanatorium. On the way they quarrelled. He hit her, killed her and planted her out at the forestry station. Then he realized he hadn't the nerve to go through with the faked kidnapping. He decided to take the easy way out. Did you see his confession note?"

I nodded.

"There you are. He came back for his gun, shot himself and that's it."

I couldn't believe he meant what he said. Surely he must have had some suspicions that the setup wasn't quite on the level? Surely the doctor had cast some doubts?

"Then we can go to bed?" I said to make sure I had heard him aright.

"Sure, go to bed. I've got to talk to the Press. Maybe they'll want a word with you before you go. Just stick around for another five minutes."

"Is Sergeant Lewis all right?"

"He's another cluck. I had an idea Dester would come back. I told Lewis to watch out, but the mug had to walk into a cracked skull. He'll be all right. He has a head like stone."

He went out into the hall and started to talk to the newspaper men. Marian and I looked at each other. I managed to smile at her.

"Well, that seems to be that," I said. "I guess you'll want to leave to-morrow, or rather to-day. I'll help you find a room."

She started to say something when the Press moved in. For the next half-hour we answered the questions that were fired at us. They wanted to know about Dester's private life; if he had quarrelled with Helen, how she had reacted, what I thought of him and her: stuff like that. I was careful to say nothing that could be proved untrue, but I did hint that they quarrelled, and there had been times when he had thrown things around. You couldn't call him violent, I told them; maybe hasty tempered. I gave them the idea that it didn't surprise me to hear Helen had died from a blow from his fist.

We got rid of them at last. Bromwich had already gone. Only the policeman at the lounge door remained. He said Bromwich had told him to stay on for a few hours in case sightseers tried to get into the house.

Marian said she would go back to the garage apartment. We arranged to meet again at ten o'clock. I saw her to the apartment.

"As soon as the inquest is over, Glyn, I'm going to Rome,"

she told me. "I want to get away from all this. You are coming with me, aren't you?"

I still had most of the two thousand dollars that Dester had paid me. It wasn't a great deal, but I wanted to get away from all this too. I didn't hesitate.

"You bet I'm coming."

"Will you be able to manage?" She looked anxiously at me. "Will you get your legacy by then?"

I looked at her, not knowing what she meant. Then I remembered I had been crazy enough to have told her before the insurance plan had come unstuck that I was coming into a legacy.

"Why, no. I don't think that's coming off now," I said. "But I've got some money put by. I'll manage. Maybe I can get myself a job in Rome."

"Let's talk about it at breakfast."

We left it like that. I went back to the house. The policeman was sitting on the terrace, basking in the early morning sun. He had made a pot of coffee, and he nodded at me as I went by and on to the house.

I stood in the hall for a minute or so, trying to realize that I was out of danger. There was the inquest, of course. An inquisitive coroner could ask some awkward questions, but it seemed to me that the main danger was over. It seemed incredible that the plan had succeeded so well. But I had still things to do. There was the soiled cloth in the saucepan I had to get rid of and my pyjamas and dressing-gown. As soon as I had the house entirely to myself I would burn them, I told myself.

I felt I couldn't live another minute without a shot of whisky. The tension and the acute anxiety of the past four hours had left me exhausted. I walked into the lounge and began to head towards the bar when I stopped short, my nerves jangling, my heart skipping a beat.

Lolling in one of the lounging chairs was a tall, dark man of about my own age who was nursing a glass of whisky, a cigarette hanging from his lips.

He looked up at me and gave me a slow, lazy grin. His darkly tanned, humorously ugly face lit up as he smiled and he waved the glass of whisky at me.

"Rotten habit to drink at this hour," he said. "My wife would have a fit if she could see me, but I've been up all night and I can't take it unless I have twelve hours sleep."

I remained motionless, looking at him.

"Are you from the Press?" I managed to get out.

"Me? Do I look like a pressman?" His grin widened. "No. I'm Steve Harmas, special investigator for the National Fidelity Insurance Company. I'm waiting for old man Maddux. He's due here any moment."

I felt a cold chill creep over me. "Maddux?"

"That's right. No one could keep the old wolf's snout out of a setup like this for long." Again he grinned at me. "Have a drink. You look as if you need one."

A few minutes to seven-fifteen, Maddux walked into the lounge. By then I had shaved, showered and dressed, moving like an automaton, my heart cold with fear. I kept telling myself that if the police were satisfied, there was no reason why Maddux shouldn't be. I reminded myself again and again that it was in his company's interest to accept the theory that Dester had killed his wife and then had shot himself. If the coroner found that Dester had committed suicide then Maddux's company would not be liable for three-quarters of a million dollars. Surely he wouldn't be such a fool as to try to prove Dester had been murdered? He would jump at the chance not to pay out the money.

For the past hour, Harmas had been talking in his slow, drawling voice about the political situation as he saw it. He seemed to take a great interest in the Russian attitude and America's policy in Europe. I scarcely listened to what he was saying, but that didn't stop him talking.

As soon as Maddux walked into the lounge, I noticed a sharp change come over Harmas. He no longer looked lazy. His face became alert, his eyes hardened and he uncoiled his tall frame from the chair and stood up as if he had released a spring inside him.

Maddux looked at us and walked over to the empty fireplace. He set his back to it, took out his pipe and began to fill it.

"I guess I'm in the way," I said. "I'll go up to my room."

"Stay right here, Mr. Nash," Maddux said. "There may be points where you can help us. Sit down. Sit down, Steve." He waited until we had sat down, then he lit his pipe and went on, "Well? What's it look like?"

Harmas lit a cigarette.

"You remember the business we had over that striptease dancer last year? When she tried to gyp us out of a million and a half bucks by a neat trick that we nearly fell for?" he said. "Well, this setup seems to me to be along those lines."

Something as cold as a dead man's hand clutched my heart

when he said that. Neither he nor Maddux was looking at me, and they didn't see my convulsive start.

Maddux said: "What makes you think that?"

"The things that have appeared to happen that couldn't possibly have happened," Harmas returned, sinking further into his chair. "It's so obviously a clever trick, but it beats me how it was worked. For instance, Dester was supposed to have entered the house by the cloakroom window. All the other windows in the house and all the doors were locked. The cloakroom window was open: so that was the way he was supposed to enter the house, but he didn't because I was right outside the cloakroom window watching the house all the evening. Dester didn't enter the house that way, so how did he get in?"

"He could have been hiding in the house during the afternoon," Maddux suggested.

"He wasn't. Lewis told me he went over the house from top to bottom at six o'clock in the evening when I took up my position in the garden. Dester wasn't in the house then, and he didn't get into the house after that time, but for all that he was found dead in the study."

Maddux moved to a chair and sat down.

"Yes: that's quite a point. What else?"

"I've seen ten suicides from shots in the head during my career," Harmas went on. "The mess was considerable, and yet Dester bled very little. If it wasn't absolutely impossible, I would have said he had shot himself some other place and then moved himself to his study to finish his bleeding there."

Maddux shifted impatiently.

"What did the medical examiner say?"

Harmas lifted his shoulders.

"He was surprised, but he didn't seem to be put off his conviction that Dester shot himself. After all, here was a guy, a gun at his side, shot through the head, causing instantaneous death, who hadn't been dead for more than fifteen minutes, who couldn't have been brought into the house since I was watching outside and all the doors and windows, except for the small cloakroom window through which it would be difficult, not to say impossible, to push a dead body, were locked. So the doc just shrugged his shoulders and said odd things happen and he had no idea why Dester hadn't bled more than he had. He accepted the situation because there was no other theory that would fit."

Maddux showed his white teeth in a grin.

"But we know better, huh?" He looked over at me. "I think

"You think there's another man?" Harmas said, lifting his head and staring at Maddux. "You think Mrs. Dester had a lover?"

"I'm damned sure she did. Between them I think they cooked up a smart idea to murder Dester and pick up some money. She didn't think up the idea. The last time she tried to defraud an insurance company she nearly landed herself in jail. This is a much more calculated effort; much more clever. A man thought it up, and who else could he be but Mrs. Dester's boy friend?"

"You really think Dester was *murdered?*" Harmas said. "That's not so hot for the company, is it? We'll have to settle the claim if he was murdered."

I looked quickly at Maddux. Everything depended on what he would say to this. He was smiling at Harmas, taking no notice of me.

"Now look," he said, "we have never bilked on a claim yet and we never will. Dester gave us an out when he cancelled the suicide clause. Maybe a lot of smaller companies would have kept out of this and accepted the police's findings that Dester *had killed himself, but I take a broader view. This is murder.* Okay, maybe it will cost us three-quarters of a million, but in the long run it will save us money. I have never let one fraud go unchallenged. I have put eighteen smart alecs in the death cell. Other smart alecs are beginning to learn that it isn't safe to monkey with the National Fidelity. If I let this one pass I'll be asking for trouble. I'm not going to let it pass. I'm going to prove this is murder. It'll be a damn fine advertisement for us, and it will act as a warning." His grin widened. "But it doesn't mean that we will have to pay up. It might not be in the interests of the public to settle such a claim. Remember that phrase – the interests of the public. It has stopped a lot of payments in the past, and it will go on stopping them in the future. Now I'll tell you both something. I think these two – Mrs. Dester and her boy friend – were smart enough to know that we would come after them with everything we've got if Dester was murdered and she put in a claim. So what do they do? I'll tell you: they planned to murder Dester and fix it so it would look like suicide. By doing that they knew they were passing up all hopes of making a claim. They hoped that as they weren't making a claim, we would stand back and let them get away with the murder. Now this is the pay off." He leaned forward, pointing the stem of his pipe at Harmas. "They were smart enough to

now that if we didn't settle the claim, we would return the premiums, and do you know how much Dester has paid in premiums over the past years? He's paid one hundred and four thousand dollars. That's what they were after: not the three-quarters of a million. That was too dangerous to grab at, but the returned premiums were something worth having and they were safe. Okay, Dester's debts amount to fifty thousand dollars. By the time the house, furniture, cars and what have you are sold there will be enough to pay the debts. They would have been left with one hundred and four thousand dollars which is quite a nice piece of money."

Harmas suppressed a yawn.

"I think you've got something," he said. "I had forgotten the premiums would be returned. What happened to Mrs. Dester then? What went wrong?"

Maddux shrugged.

"I don't know and I don't care. Maybe they quarrelled. Maybe the boy friend killed her. Maybe Dester killed her. I don't know. That's for the police to find out. What I do know is that our client was murdered, and I'm going to take damn good care the killer doesn't get away with it!" He suddenly turned and looked at me. "Well, Mr. Nash, what do you think of all this? You haven't said much up to now. Have you any ideas who Mrs. Dester's boy friend is?"

I knew now that I had a desperate fight on my hands. I could still get clear if I played my cards right, but if I made one slip, I was through.

"I don't know who he is," I said, forcing myself to meet his steady, inquiring stare, "but I did once see her with someone."

Maddux smiled. He looked over at Harmas. "Do you see? Dig enough and something comes to the surface." He turned back to me. "When was this, Mr. Nash?"

"Maybe a week ago. I'm not sure. I happened to be down town. I saw Mrs. Dester and this man come out of the Brown Derby."

"Can you give me a description of him?"

"Why, yes." The words seemed to come out of my mouth without any effort on my part. "He was tall, fair, with a blond moustache, around thirty-five or six, good-looking, well-dressed."

Maddux looked over at Harmas. "Got that? At the Brown Derby. You've got to find this guy."

"Yeah," Harmas said. "There are only about twenty thousand tall, fair, good-looking guys in Hollywood, but never mind, I'll find him."

"Did you get the impression, Mr. Nash, that they were more than friendly?" Maddux asked.

"I'm afraid I didn't," I said. "I was driving past. I just caught a glimpse of them. She had her hand on his arm. I didn't have much time to see if they were on good or bad terms. I just saw him."

"Well, okay, that's something to work on," Maddux said and got to his feet. "You'd better get working on it," he went on to Harmas. "Go down to the Brown Derby and see if you can get a lead on this guy. I'm going to talk to Bromwich."

Harmas unwound his long, lean frame and stood up.

"I haven't had any sleep for twenty-four hours. I don't suppose that interests you, does it?"

Maddux waved this aside. He turned to me.

"Thanks for the information, Mr. Nash. This is the lead I've been looking for."

"I only saw them together once," I said.

"Once is enough." He caught hold of my hand in a knuckle-cracking grip, nodded and then started across the lounge towards the hall.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"DON'T panic."

I spoke the words aloud as I stood watching Maddux's car disappear down the drive. The big lounge felt lonely and full of empty spaces.

Was Maddux playing with me? I wondered. Did he guess I had been Helen's lover? Was he laying a trap for me or had he really accepted my story of the blond man at the Brown Derby?

For all I knew he was on his way down to police headquarters to get them to come out here and arrest me. I knew I dared not waste a moment of my freedom. I had to get rid of the pyjamas, dressing-gown and gloves. I had to destroy the will. Sooner or later, if I were arrested, the police would find out that I had a safe deposit and they would get a search warrant. It would be fatal to me if they found the will.

I hurried into the kitchen and took from the saucepan the soiled, damp cloth with which I had cleaned out the deep-freeze cabinet, then I ran up the stairs to my bedroom. I put my pyjamas, dressing-gown, gloves and the cloth into a suit-case, my old working suit and my few shirts and socks on top of them. I shut the case and, leaving it on the bed, I went to the window and looked down on to the terrace.

The policeman was strolling up and down, his hands behind his back, his cap pushed forward to shield his eyes from the sun. I decided to go out the back way, cross the garden to the garden gate that led on to a back street that would take me down to the bus stop on the lower end of Hillside Crescent.

I picked up the suit-case and went swiftly down the stairs, along the passage to the kitchen and out through the rear exit.

A four-minute fast walk brought me to the bus stop. A bus came along within a minute or so and I boarded it. I kept looking back out of the window to see if a car was following me, but the long, steep road was empty of all cars.

I got off at the junction of Figueroa Street and Firestone and, moving briskly, I mingled with the crowd of business men and shop girls going to work. I approached the all-night safe-deposit vaults as the street clock was striking half past eight.

It so happened that the traffic was heavy and I didn't immediately cross the street, and it was well that I didn't. I spotted

a big black car parked near the entrance to the vaults in which were sitting four large, beefy-faced men. I knew at once they were policemen, and I ducked into a shop doorway out of their sight. What were they doing outside the vaults? Were they waiting for me to show or were they waiting to pick up someone else? One thing I was sure of: they weren't sitting there for the fun of it.

Cold, sick fear tugged at my heart. Was this the beginning of it? Were they waiting now for me to make a false move before they pounced?

I tried to assure myself that the four men in the car weren't waiting for me. They probably knew nothing about me, but I hadn't the nerve to cross the street and enter the vaults. I retraced my steps and went into an all-night drug store around the corner. I ordered a coffee, and sat smoking while I wondered what I had best do.

I had a growing urge to get out of town. I took out my wallet and checked to see how much money I had with me. It wasn't much: five dollars and some small change. I had two thousand in the bank. But dare I wait until the bank opened? I had to wait, I told myself. Without money I was sunk.

So I waited. I moved from the drug store to a snack bar and then on to another drug store. The hands of my watch crawled on. After three coffees and having smoked all my cigarettes, I decided I could start towards my bank. I moved slowly, keeping a look-out for any man who might be a detective. This time I approached my bank cautiously, keeping to the opposite side of the road. I spotted another big black car, parked within forty yards of my bank, containing four men.

I stepped into a shop arcade out of their sight. I knew then that the police were on to me. This couldn't be a coincidence. They were waiting for me to lose my nerve, get my money out and bolt.

I went into a drug store, ordered another cup of coffee and sat down at a table against the wall. My hands were shaking so badly I was afraid to pick up the cup. I had to get out before the net closed, but how was I to do so without money?

Then I thought of Solly. He might lend me enough to get out of town. He had been in trouble with the police himself, and he would know what it was like to be in this kind of jam.

I went over to the row of telephone booths and put a call through to Solly's office.

Patsy answered.

"Is Jack there?" I asked.

"No. Is that you, Glyn?"

"That's right. Look, Patsy, it's important I talk to Jack. Where shall I find him?"

"He's down at police headquarters."

My heart kicked against my ribs.

"He's . . . what?"

"At police headquarters. A detective came about half an hour ago and took him down there. Glyn, are you in trouble?"

I drew my lips off my teeth in a mirthless grin. That was an understatement.

"I could be," I said. "What do you know, Patsy?"

"Jack sent me out of the room, but I listened outside the door," Patsy said, speaking fast and low. "The detective was asking questions about you and Mrs. Dester."

I wiped the sweat off my face.

"What kind of questions?"

"He wanted to know if Jack knew anything about you and her: if you were friendly with her or went out with her."

"What did he say, Patsy?"

"I don't know. I couldn't stay outside the door that long. After a few minutes, Jack came out and said he was going down to headquarters."

"How did he look?"

"Scared. I'd keep away from him, Glyn. You mustn't trust him. He only thinks of himself."

"I guess that's right. Well, thanks, Patsy. Thanks a lot."

"Is there anything I can do? This woman's dead, isn't she? It's in the papers."

"Yes, she's dead. No, there's nothing you can do. So long, kid, and thanks."

I hung up and went back to my table, pausing at the bar to buy a pack of cigarettes. I lit one and sat down again. Solly would tell them how I had offered him five hundred dollars to dig into Helen's past. They would guess I had planned to blackmail her. My mouth turned dry. That would explain why I had killed her if they ever hooked me to her killing.

I felt the net was tightening. A feeling of panic threatened to submerge me. For some minutes I sat motionless, trying to think of a way out, then I remembered Marian. It was possible that she had some money I could borrow. I went back to the telephone booth and called Dester's number. A man's voice answered. I had forgotten the policeman who had been left to watch t

house. There were extensions all over the house. He would be certain to listen in to what I was going to say. I knew I couldn't involve Marian in this business.

"Hello there?" the policeman was saying. "Who's calling?"

I dropped the receiver back on to its cradle and came out of the booth.

I felt trapped and beaten. I very nearly gave up then. If I had had the courage I would have gone to police headquarters and told them the truth, but I just couldn't face it. I told myself I still had a slight chance of getting away if I acted at once. I had to get rid of the suit-case. If they caught me with it I couldn't see how I could ever beat the rap.

I picked up the case and left the drug store. Walking quickly, I made my way to the central bus stop and went into the left-luggage office.

"I want to check this in for a few days," I said to the clerk who took the case indifferently, slapped on a label, gave me a ticket and tossed the case on to a shelf.

If I had any luck I should be out of the country before the case was found, if it were ever found.

I felt less scared now I was rid of the suit-case. I walked through the swing doors of the left-luggage office into the hot sunshine. There were about twenty buses lined up, waiting to go. The crowd of travellers moved around me, jostling me while I tried to make up my mind which bus to take. I decided finally to head for San Francisco. I walked over to the time-table board to see what time the San Francisco bus was due out.

I was running my finger down the long list of place names when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a big man come up to stand close beside me.

I felt my heart contract. The kind of terror you experience in a nightmare took hold of me. Slowly I turned my head. A large, red-faced man in a shabby suit and a slouch hat was looking intently at me. He had cop written all over him.

"Okay, Nash," he said curtly. "We want you. Come on, let's go."

I stood staring at him, unable to think, unable to move. Another big man materialized out of the crowd and closed in on me.

"Take it easy," the first cop said. "There's no need to get excited. Lieutenant Bromwich wants to talk to you. Come on."

I went with them to the waiting car, got in the back with the first cop while the other one slid under the driving wheel.

Then I saw a third detective come out of the left-luggage office, carrying my suit-case. He got in the front, resting the suit-case across his knees.

"Let's go," the first cop said in a bored, flat voice.

The car moved off.

I looked out of the car window at the traffic, the people moving on the sidewalks, the shop windows and the blue of the sky. It seemed to me that it was imperative to store up in my mind the sight of these familiar things. I had a feeling I wouldn't see them again.

The room was small with dirty yellow walls and it smelt of stale sweat, stale tobacco smoke, unwashed bodies and carbolic acid. The furnishing consisted of two hard, straight-backed chairs and a trestle table spotted with ink stains.

A bored policeman sat in a chair by the door and stared gloomily at a bluebottle fly that walked across the ceiling. I sat in the chair by the table, waiting.

Four hours had dragged by since I had been brought to this room. I had been given a cup of coffee that stood on the table, cold and untouched. The saucer was crammed with my cigarette-butts.

The policeman hadn't spoken during the four hours. Every so often he would shift his small, hard eyes from the fly to me and then back to the fly again.

I didn't kid myself. I was in trouble. The chances were that this was the beginning of the end of my life. This could be the first step towards the gas chamber. During the long hours of waiting, I had decided my only hope was to tell the truth. It depended on the attorney I could get whether the jury would believe me or not. At least Dester's suicide note should stop them charging me with his murder, but would they believe I had never intended to kill Helen? Even if they did believe me, I would still go to jail for a long time. This was the end of me anyway. Maybe it would be better to go to the gas chamber than to spend twenty years behind walls.

The door suddenly opened and the cop who had picked me up at the bus station came in.

"The lieutenant is ready for you now," he said.

I got up and walked across the room and followed him down a long corridor into another room less shabby than the one I had just left.

Bromwich stood by the window, a cigar between his teeth, a

scowl on his face. Seated on a hard-backed chair before the desk, his pipe in his hand, was Maddux.

Bromwich pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he said.

The cop who had brought me went out, leaving the door half open. Moving slowly, I sat down.

Bromwich looked over at Maddux.

"Okay, you can have him for ten minutes. Then I want him."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Maddux said. "I won't be longer than that."

Bromwich gave me a hard, hostile stare and then went out, shutting the door behind him.

Maddux began to fill his pipe.

"Well, Nash," he said, not looking at me, "you didn't last long, did you? You must have put in a lot of hard work and thought to have pulled a stunt like this, but it came unstuck pretty fast. It was a smart idea and you nearly foxed me. I picked up two clues that put me bang on the beam. I investigated your background and I found out that you had worked for a refrigeration company some two years ago. That made me think. Then when I talked to Miss Temple and she told me about her sleep-walking act and how you had insisted on keeping the freezer motor running, I saw how you had fixed it. Just two clues and a nice idea went haywire. It was a nice idea, Nash, but it couldn't have worked: the lack of blood and the lack of finger-prints pointed to a trick. I had only to dig deep enough to find out how the trick was worked."

I didn't say anything. I watched him light his pipe.

"You're in trouble, Nash," he went on. "We have an open-and-shut case against you. We're experts at this kind of racket. We don't want a confession out of you. We have enough evidence against you to put you into the gas chamber twice over, but once will be enough."

"I didn't kill Dester," I said, my voice unsteady. "And you can't prove that I did. I have his suicide note. He shot himself."

"No, he didn't; you killed him," Maddux said mildly. "I'll tell you why you did it and how you did it. He gave you a job as his chauffeur. You and Helen Dester fell for each other. She knew he was insured for three-quarters of a million and she wanted that money as she wanted Van Tomlin's insurance money. But you were smart. You knew if Dester was murdered, she and you would be our suspects. You found out that Dester had cancelled the self-destruction clause in his insurance policy.

You also found out that he had already paid a hundred and four thousand dollars in premiums, and you knew that if an insurance company doesn't settle a claim, *it is a rule that they return all premiums.*" He laid an emphasis on these words. "You decided it would be safer to go for the smaller amount, and that's what you planned to do. But you saw no reason why you should share the money with Helen Dester. You got Solly to dig into her past and you found out that she killed Van Tomlin. Although Dester and his wife didn't get on together, he was still in love with her. You blackmailed him. You threatened to tell the police what you had found out about her unless he gave you a sum of money . . . as much as he could then afford. He gave you two thousand, six hundred dollars that pretty well emptied his account. We can prove this. We have the cheque he gave you."

"That's a lie!" I sat forward and glared at him. "He paid me a year's salary. He said I might as well have it while it was there."

Maddux shrugged.

"Is anyone going to believe that? But never mind, you can argue that out with the jury. I'm telling you what happened; what the jury will believe happened. You weren't satisfied with such a trifling sum as two thousand six hundred – blackmailers are never satisfied. You forced him to leave the rest of his estate, when his debts were paid, to you in his will. We've seen the will and the wording fixes you, Nash. It says everything is to come to you after Helen Dester's death. That was all right with you because you planned to murder her. You shot Dester. You and she put him in the deep-freeze cabinet. Now why did you put him in there instead of calling the police right away and telling them that Dester had shot himself? I'll tell you why. You had allowed Helen Dester to believe she and you were after the three-quarters of a million insurance money. You had told her the plan was to make it look as if Dester had been kidnapped and later murdered so she could put in a claim for the full amount. You wanted to get her to the forestry station and that was the only way you could do it. You impersonated Dester so Marian Temple could see you leave. You took Helen Dester to the forestry station and you killed her. You tied her and left her. Your idea was to throw the blame on to Dester, making out he had killed her, then faked it to look like a kidnapping. He was to lose his nerve, come back to the house, write a confession and kill himself. It looked a cinch to you, but when Harmas started to investigate and pointed out the damning facts that there were no

fingerprints, that Dester couldn't have got into the house without being seen and that he hadn't bled enough, you lost your nerve. I found out that you had a safe deposit and I got Bromwich to watch for you there. I also got him to block you off from your bank. So what did you do? What every guilty character does: you tried to bolt."

"I didn't kill Dester!" I exclaimed. "I didn't kill her either! It was an accident! I didn't mean to hit her . . ."

"I shouldn't talk like that," Maddux said and knocked out his pipe. "If I were you I wouldn't say anything until you have had a talk with your lawyer. By the way, do you know of a good lawyer? If you don't I do. I know a man who isn't scared of a forlorn hope and who will put up a good fight for you."

"I don't want anyone you recommend," I said.

"Don't be a fool. I'm not interested one way or the other now. My business was to block any claim on my company. I've done that. This guy could help you."

I didn't know anyone. I had to have someone.

"Well, all right."

"Okay. I'll have him come over right away," Maddux said, "but don't expect miracles. He's a good man, but I don't think he can save you. I don't think anyone can save you. At least you can be sure he will try." He got up and crossed to the door. "Well so long. I won't wish you luck. I don't think you deserve it."

I listened to the sound of his footfalls receding down the corridor.

After a minute or so, Bromwich came into the room with two detectives.

As I looked at his hard, hostile eyes, I knew this was the beginning of my end.